

THE ARGOSY.

DECEMBER 1, 1874.

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHAT TO DO NEXT.

NOT to everyone among the children of men is given the power, the faculty, to act as comforter to others. To listen to another's sorrow, to be told the history of another's trouble, is one thing: to be able to give back comfort is another. That delicate intuitive sympathy with another's woe, which draws away the sting even in the telling of it; which makes that woe its own property, as it were; which sheds balm round the sufferer in every word, and look, and touch: this is surely as much a special gift as the gift of song, or the poet's fine phrenzy, and without it the world would be a much poorer place than it is.

This rare gift of sympathy was possessed by Edith Dering in a pre-eminent degree. She was at once emotional and sympathetic. To Lionel in his dire trouble she was a comforter in the truest sense of the word. It was she who preserved his mental balance—the equipoise of his mind. But for her sweet offices he would have become a monomaniac or a misanthrope of the bitterest kind. Naturally she had him with her as much as possible, but still his home was of necessity at Park Newton. To the world he was simply Richard Dering, the unmarried nephew of General St. George. It would not do for him to be seen going to Fern Cottage sufficiently often to excite either scandal or suspicion. He could only visit there as the intimate friend of Mrs. Garside and her niece. Sometimes he took his uncle with him, sometimes Tom, in order to divert suspicion. For him to enter the garden-gate of Fern Cottage was to cross the threshold of his earthly paradise. Edith and he had been married in the depth of a great trouble—troubles and danger had beset the path of their wedded life ever since. Owing, perhaps, to that very cause, week by week, and

month by month, their love seemed only to grow in depth and intensity. As yet it had lost nothing of its pristine charm and freshness. The gold-dust of romance lingered about it still. They were man and wife; they had been man and wife for months; but to the world at large they seemed nothing more than ordinary friends.

But all Edith's care and watchful love could not lift her husband, except by fits and starts, out of those moods of gloom and depression which seemed to be settling more closely down upon him day by day. As link after link was added to the chain of evidence, each one leading to incriminate his cousin still more deeply, his moods seemed to grow darker and more difficult of removal. With his cousin, Lionel associated no more than was absolutely necessary. They rarely met each other till dinner-time, and then they met with nothing more than a simple "How do you do?" and in conversation they never got beyond some half-dozen of the barest common-places. Lionel always left the table as soon as the cloth was removed.

On Kester's side there was no love lost. That dark, stern-faced cousin was a perpetual menace to him, and he hated him accordingly. He hated him for his likeness to his dead and gone brother. He hated him because of the look in his eyes—so coldly scrutinizing, so searching, so immovable. He hated him because it was a look that he could in nowise give back. Try as he might, he could not face Lionel's steady gaze.

For some two or three weeks after his return from Bath with Janvard's written confession, Lionel was perfectly quiescent. He took no further action whatever. He was, indeed, debating in his own mind what further action it behoved him to take. There was no need to seek for any further evidence, if indeed any more would have been forthcoming. All that he wanted he had now got; it was simply a question as to what use he should make of it. Day and night that was the question which presented itself before his mind: what use should he make of the knowledge in his possession? His mind was divided this way and that; day passed after day, and still he could by no means decide as to the course which it would be best for him to adopt.

Of all this he said not a word to Edith: he could not have borne to discuss the question even with her; but it is possible that she surmised something of it. She knew that she had only to wait, and everything would be told her. Perhaps to Bristow, who knew all the details of the case as well as he did, he might have said something as to the difficulty by which he was beset; but as it happened, Tom was not at home just then. Much of his time was spent by Lionel in long solitary walks far and wide through the country. He could think better when he was walking than when sitting quietly at home, he used to say; and, indeed, the country folk who encountered him often turned to look at him, as he stalked along, with his eyes set straight before him, gazing

on vacancy, and with lids that moved rapidly as he whispered to himself of his dreadful secret.

But, little by little, the need of counsel, of sympathy, grew more strong upon him. He was still as much at a loss as ever as to the step which he ought to take next.

"They shall decide for me," he said at last. "I will put myself into their hands. By their verdict I will abide."

General St. George at this time was away from Park Newton. As has been already stated, he had been summoned to the sick-bed of a very old and valued friend. The illness was a long and tedious one, and at the request of his friend the General stayed on, and kept him company. Truth to tell, he was by no means sorry to get away from Park Newton for awhile. Of late his position there had been anything but a pleasant one. The silent, deadly feud between his two nephews troubled him not a little. If Kester would only have gone away, then, so far, all would have been well. But having pressed him so earnestly to visit Park Newton, he could not, with any show of conscience, ask him to go till he was ready to do so of his own accord. Knowing what he knew, that Kester was all but proved to have been the murderer of Percy Osmond, he might well not care to live under the same roof with him, hiding his feelings under a mask, and, while pretending to know nothing, to be in reality cognisant of the whole dreadful story. Knowing what he knew ; that Richard was none other than Lionel ; and knowing the quest on which he was engaged, and that, sooner or later, the climax must come, he might well wish to be away from Park Newton when that most wretched day should dawn—a day which would prove the innocence of one nephew at the price of the other's guilt. Therefore did General St. George accept his old friend's invitation to stay with him for an indefinite length of time—till, in fact, Kester should have left Park Newton, or till the tangled knot of events should, in some other way, have unravelled itself.

When at length Lionel had decided that he would take the advice of his friends as to what his future course should be, he was obliged to await Tom Bristow's return before it was possible to do anything. Then, when Tom did get back home, the General had to be written to. When he understood what he was wanted for, he agreed to come on certain conditions. He was to come to Fern Cottage, spend one night there, and go back to his friend's house next day. No one, except those assembled at the cottage, was to know anything of his journey. Above all, it was to be kept a profound secret from Kester St. George.

Thus it fell out that on a certain April evening there were assembled in the parlour of the cottage, Edith, Mrs. Garside, General St. George, Tom Bristow, and Lionel. It was a very serious occasion, and they all felt it to be such.

The General would sit close to Edith, whom he had not seen for a

little while ; and several times during the evening he took possession of one of her hands, and patted it affectionately between his own withered palms.

" You are not looking quite so well, my dear, as when I saw you last," had been his first words after kissing her. Her cheeks were, indeed, just beginning to look in the slightest degree hollow and worn, nor did her eyes look quite so bright as of old. The wonder was, considering all that she had gone through during the last twelve months, that she looked as fair and fresh as she did. Of Mrs. Garside, whom we have not seen for some little time, it may be said that she looked plumper and more matronly than ever. But then nothing could have kept Mrs. Garside from looking plump and matronly. She was one of those people off whom the troubles and anxieties of life slip as easily as water slips off a duck's back. Although she had a copious supply of tears at command, nothing ever troubled her deeply or for long, simply because there was no depth to be troubled. She was always cheerful, because she was shallow ; and she was always kind-hearted, so long as her kindness of heart did not involve any self-sacrifice on her part. " What a very pleasant person Mrs. Garside is," was the general verdict of society. And so she was—very pleasant. If her father had been hanged on a Monday for sheep stealing, by Tuesday she would have been as pleasant and cheerful as ever.

But we must not be unjust to Mrs. Garside. She had one affection, and one only ; her love for Edith. During all the days of Edith's tribulation, her aunt had never deserted her—had not even thought of deserting her ; and now, for Edith's sake, she had buried herself alive in Fern Cottage, where her only excitement was a little mild shopping, now and then, in Duxley High Street, under the incognito of a thick veil, or a welcome visit once and again from Miss Culpepper. Under these depressing circumstances, it ought perhaps to be put down to the credit of Mrs. Garside, rather than to her discredit, that her cheerfulness was not one whit abated, and that her face was a picture of health and content.

" I think you know why I have asked you to meet me here to-night," began Lionel. " I want your advice : I want you to tell me what step I must take next. You know what the purpose of my life has been ever since the night I escaped from prison. You know how persistently I have pursued that purpose—that I have allowed nothing to deter me or turn me aside from it. The result is that there has grown under my hands a fatal array of evidence, all tending to implicate one man—all pointing with deadly accuracy to one person, and to one only, as the murderer of Percy Osmond. I have but to open my mouth, and the four walls of a prison would shut him round as fast as ever they shut round me ; I have but to speak of half I know, and that man would have to take his trial for Wilful Murder even

as I took mine. But shall I do this thing? That is the question that I want you to help me to answer. So long as the chain of evidence remained incomplete, so long as certain links were wanting to it, I felt that my task was unfinished. But at last I have all that I want. There is nothing more to search for. My task, so far, is at an end. Knowing, then, what I know, and with such proofs in my possession, am I to stop here? Am I to rest content with what I have done, and go no step farther? Or am I to go through with it to the bitter end? What that end would involve you know as well as I could tell you."

He ceased, and for a little while they all sat in silence. General St. George was the first to speak. "Lionel knows, and you all know, that from the very first he has had my heartfelt sympathy in this unhappy business. He has not had my sympathy only, he has had my help, although I have seen for a long time the point to which we were all tending, and the terrible consequences that must necessarily ensue. Me those consequences affect with peculiar force. One nephew can only be saved at the expense of the irretrievable ruin and disgrace of the other. It is not as though we had been searching in the dark, and had there found the blood-stained hand of a stranger. The hand we have so grasped is that of one of our own kin—one of ourselves; and that makes the dreadful part of the affair. Still, I would not have you misunderstand me. I am as deeply vowed to Lionel—my sympathy and help are his as much to-day—as ever; and should he choose to go through with this business in the same way as he would go through with it in the case of an utter stranger, I shall be the last man in the world to blame him. More: I will march with him side by side, whatever be the goal to which his steps may lead him. Such unparalleled wrongs as his demand unparalleled reparation. For all that, however, it is still a most serious question whether there is not a possibility of effecting some kind of a compromise: whether there is not somewhere a door of escape open by means of which we may avert a catastrophe almost too terrible even to bear thinking about."

"What is your opinion, Bristow?" said Lionel, turning to Tom. "What say you, my friend of friends?"

"I have a certain diffidence in offering any opinion," said Tom, "simply on account of the relationship of the two persons chiefly involved. To tell the world all that you know would, undoubtedly, bring about a family catastrophe of a most painful nature. It therefore seems to me that the members of that family, and they alone, should be empowered to offer an opinion on a question so delicate as the one now under consideration."

"Not so," said Lionel, emphatically. "No one could have a better right, or even so great a right, to offer an opinion as you. But for you I should not have been here to-night to ask for that opinion."

"Nor I here but for you," interrupted Tom.

"I will put my question to you in a different form," said Lionel; "and so put to you, I shall expect you to answer it in your usual clear and straightforward way. Bristow, if you were circumstanced exactly as I am now circumstanced, what would you do in my place?"

"I would go through with the task I had taken in hand, let the consequences be what they might," said Tom, without a moment's hesitation. "Nothing should hold me back. I would clear my own name and my own fame, and let punishment fall where punishment is due. You are still young, Dering, and a fair career and a happy future may still be yours, if you like to claim them."

Tom's words were very emphatic, and for a little while no one spoke. "We have yet to hear what Edith has to say," said the General. "Her interests in the matter are second only to those of Lionel."

"Yes, it is my wife's turn to speak next," said Lionel.

"What my opinion is, you know well, Lionel, and have known for a long time."

"My uncle and Bristow would like to hear it from your own lips."

"Uncle," began Edith, with a little blush, "whatever Lionel may ultimately decide to do will doubtless be for the best. The last wish I have in the world is to lead him or guide him in any way in opposition to his own convictions. But I have thought this: that it would be very terrible indeed to have to take part in a second tragedy—a tragedy that, in some of its features, would be far more dreadful than that first one, which none of us can ever forget. No one can know better than I know how grievously my husband has been sinned against. But nothing can altogether undo the wrong that has been done. Would it make my husband a happy man if, instead of being the accused, he should become the accuser? Let us for a few moments try to imagine that this second tragedy has been worked out in all its frightful consequences. That my husband has told everything. That he who is guilty has been duly punished. That Lionel's fair fame has been re-established, and that he and I are living at Park Newton as if nothing had ever happened to disturb the commonplace tenour of our lives. In such a case, would my husband be a happy man? No. I know him too well to believe it possible that he could ever be happy or contented. The image of that man—one of his own kith and kin, we must remember—would be for ever in his mind. He would be the prey of a remorse all the more bitter in that the world would hold him as without blame. But would he so hold himself? I think not—I am sure not. He would feel as if he had sought for and accepted the price of blood." Overcome by her emotion, she ceased.

"I think in a great measure as you think, my dear," said the General. "What course do you propose that your husband should adopt?"

"It is not for me to propose anything," answered Edith. "I can only suggest certain views of the question, and leave it for you and Lionel to adopt them or reject them, as may seem best to you."

"Holding the proofs of his innocence in his hands, as he does," said the General, "is it your wish that Lionel should sit down contented with what he has already achieved; and knowing that the real facts of his history is in the keeping of you and me, and two or three trusted friends, rest satisfied with that and ask for nothing more?"

"No, I hardly go so far as that," said Edith, with a faint smile. "I think that the man who committed the crime should know that Lionel still lives, and that he holds in his own hands the proof at once of his own innocence and of the other's guilt. Beyond that I say this. The world believes my husband to be dead: rather than re-open so terrible a wound, let the world continue so to believe. My husband and I can do without it, as well as it can do without us. We have our mutual love, which nothing can deprive us of; against that the shafts of fortune beat as vainly as hailstones against a castle wall. On this earth of ours are places sweet and fair without number. In one of them—not altogether dissevered from those ties of friendship which have already made our married life so beautiful—my husband and I could build up a new home, with no sad memories of the past to cling around it; and when this haunting shadow that now broods over his life has been brushed away for ever, then, I think—I know—I feel sure that I can make him happy!" Her voice, her eyes, her whole manner were imbued with a sweet fervour that it was impossible to resist.

Lionel crossed over and kissed her. "My darling!" he said, "but for your love and care I should long ago have been a madman."

"You, my dear, have put into words," said the General, "the very ideas that have for a long time been floating about, half formed, in my own mind. Lionel, what have you to say to your wife's suggestions?"

"Only this: that I have made up my mind to follow them. *He* shall know that I am alive, and that I hold in my hands the proofs of his guilt, ready to produce them at a moment's notice, should I ever be compelled to do so. Beyond that, I will leave him in peace—to such peace as his own conscience will give him. The world believes Lionel Dering to be dead and buried. Dead and buried he shall still remain, and 'quiescat in pace' be written under his name."

The General got up with tears in his eyes and shook Lionel warmly by the hand. "Good boy! good boy! you will not go without your reward," was all that he could say.

"A few weeks," said Lionel, "and the eighth of May will be here—the anniversary of poor Osmond's murder. On that day he shall be told. But I shall tell him in my own fashion. On that day, uncle, you must promise to give me your company; and you yours, Tom. After that I shall trouble you no more."

If Tom Bristow dissented from the conclusion thus come to, he said no word to that effect. There was one point, however, that struck his practical mind as having been altogether overlooked; and as soon as Edith and Mrs. Garside had left the room, he did not fail to mention it.

"What about the income of eleven thousand a year?" he said. "You are surely not going to let the whole of that slip through your fingers?"

"Ah, by-the-by, that point never struck me," said the General. "No, it would be decidedly unjust both to yourself and your wife, Lionel, to give up the income as well as the position."

"Now you are importing a mercenary tone into the affair that is utterly distasteful to me. It looks as if I were being bribed to keep silence."

"That is sheer nonsense," said the General. "You have but to hold out your hand to take the whole."

Lionel said no more, but went and sat down dejectedly on the sofa.

"You and I must settle this point between us," said the General to Tom. "It is most important. It shall be my place to see that whatever is agreed upon shall be duly carried out in the arrangement between the two men. I should think that if the income were divided it would be about as fair a thing as could be done. What say you?"

"I agree with you entirely," said Tom. "The other one will have the name and position to keep up, and that can't be done for nothing."

"Then it shall be so settled."

"There is one other point that I think ought to be settled at the same time. Who is to have Park Newton after *his* death? Lionel may have children. *He* may marry and have children. But in common justice the estate ought to be secured on Dering's eldest child, whether the present possessor die with or without an heir."

"Certainly, certainly. Good gracious me! a most valuable suggestion. Strange, now, that it never struck me. Yes, yes: Lionel's eldest child must have the estate. I will see that there is no possible mistake on that point."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HOW TOM WINS HIS WIFE.

AFTER Mrs. McDermot's departure from Pincote, life there slipped back into its old quiet groove—into its old dull groove, which was growing duller day by day. The Squire had altogether ceased to see company: when any of his old friends called he was never at home to them; and on the score of ill health he declined every invitation that was sent to him. But it was not altogether on

account of his health that these invitations were declined, because three or four times a week he would be seen somewhere about the country roads being driven out by Jane in the basket-carriage. There was another reason for this state of things—a reason to which his friends and neighbours were not slow in giving a name. The Squire in his old age was becoming a miser : that is what the said friends and neighbours averred. But to dub him as a miser was altogether unjust : he was simply becoming penurious for his daughter's sake, as many other men are penurious for ends much more ignoble. He had, in fact, decided upon carrying out that modest scheme of domestic retrenchment of which mention has been made in a previous chapter ; and the mode of living adopted by him now did undoubtedly, to many people, seem miserly in comparison with that lavish hospitality for which Pincote had heretofore been noted. The Squire knew that he could not go much into society without giving return invitations. Now, the four or five state dinners which he had been in the habit of giving every year were very elaborate and expensive affairs, and he no longer felt himself justified in keeping them up. Instead of spending so many pounds per annum in entertaining a number of people for whom he cared little or nothing, would it not be better to add the amount ; trifling though it might seem ; to that other trifling amount—only some few hundreds of pounds when all was told—which he had already managed to scrape together as a little nest-egg for Jane when he should be gone from her side for ever, and Pincote could no longer be her home ? “If I had only died a year ago,” he would sometimes say to himself, “then Jenny would have had a handsome fortune to call her own. Now she is worth only a few hundreds.”

Half his journeys into Duxley now-a-days were to the bank—not to Sugden's Bank, we may be sure, but to the Town and County—and he now gloated over every five pounds added to the fund invested in his daughter's name as something more added to the nest-egg ; and to be able to put away fifty pounds in a lump now afforded him far more genuine delight than the putting away of a thousand would have done six months previously.

There had been little or no conversation between Jane and her father respecting the loss of her fortune since that memorable night when the Squire himself first heard the fatal tidings, and Jane was far more anxious than he was that the topic should never be broached between them again. She guessed in part what his object might be when he began to cut down the house expenses at Pincote—discharging some half dozen of his people ; raising his farm rents where it was possible to do so ; letting out the whole, instead of a portion only, of the park as pasturage for sheep ; selling some of his horses, and the whole of his famous cellar of wines ; besides arranging for part of the produce of his kitchen garden to be taken by a greengrocer at Duxley.

She guessed, but that was all. Her father said nothing definite as to his reasons for so doing, and she made no inquiry. The sphere of his enjoyment had now become a very limited one. If it gave him pleasure—and she could not doubt that it did—to live penitulously so as to be enabled to put away a few extra pounds per annum, she would not mar the edge of that pleasure by seeming even to notice what was going on, much less make any inquiry as to its meaning. The Squire, on his part, had many a good chuckle in the solitude of his own room. "After I'm gone, she'll know what it all means," he would say to himself. "She's puzzled now—they are all puzzled. They call me a miser, do they? Let 'em call me what they like. Another twenty put away to-day. That makes—" and out would come his pass-book and his spectacles.

The fact that the Squire no longer either received company or went into society compelled Jane, in a great measure, to follow his example. There were two or three houses to which, if she chose, she could still go without its being thought strange that there was no return invitation to Pincote; and there were two or three old school friends whom she could invite to a cup of tea in her own little room without their feeling offended that they were not asked to stay to dinner. But of society, in the general sense of the term, Jane now saw little or nothing. To her this was no source of regret. Just now she was far too deeply in love to care very much for general society.

Happy was it for Jane that the only exception to her father's no-society rule was in favour of the man she loved. The Squire had by no means forgotten Mrs. McDermot's warning words, nor Tom's frank confession of his love for Jane; and it had certainly been no part of his intention to encourage Tom's visits to Pincote after the widow's abrupt departure. In honour of that departure, there had been next day a little dinner of state, at which Mr. Culpepper had made his appearance in a dress-coat and white cravat, at which there had been French side dishes, and at which the Squire had drunk Tom's health in a bumper of the very best port which his cellar contained. But when they parted that night,—when the Squire, having hobbled to the front door, shook hands with Tom and bade him good-night,—it was with a sort of half intimation that some considerable time would probably elapse before they should have the pleasure of seeing him at Pincote again. In the first flush of his delight at having got rid of his sister, the Squire thought that he could be content and happy at home of an evening with no company save that of Jane, even as he had been content and happy long before he had known Tom Bristow. But in so thinking he had over-looked one very important point. The Titus Culpepper of six months ago had been a prosperous, well-to-do gentleman, satisfied with himself and all the world, in tolerable health, and excited by the prospect of making a magnificent fortune without trouble

or anxiety ; the Titus Culpepper of to-day was a broken-down gambler —a gambler who had madly speculated with his daughter's fortune, and had lost it. Broken down, too, was he in health, in spirits, and in temper ; and, worst sign of all, a man who no longer found any pleasure in the company of his own thoughts, and who began to dislike to sit alone even for half an hour at a time. Of this change in himself the Squire knew and suspected nothing : how few of us do know o changes ! Other people may change—nay, do we not see them changing daily around us, and smile good-naturedly as we note how querulous and hard to please poor Jones has become of late ? But that we—we—should so change, becoming a burden to ourselves and a trial to those around us, with our queer cross-grained ways, our peevish, variable tempers, and our general belief that the sun shines less brightly, and that the world is less beautiful than it was a little while ago,—that is altogether impossible. The change is always in others, never in our immaculate selves.

The Squire was a man who all his life had preferred men's company to that of the opposite sex. His tastes were not at all aesthetic. He liked to talked about cattle, and crops, and the state of the markets ; to talk a little about imperial politics—chiefly confined to blackguarding “the other side of the House”—and a great deal about local politics. He has been in the habit of talking by the hour together about paving and lighting, and sewage, and the state of the highways : all useful matters, without a doubt, but hardly topics calculated to interest a lady. Though he liked to have Jane play to him now and then—but never for more than ten minutes at any one time—he always designated it as “tinkling” ; and as often as not, when he asked her to sing, he would say, “Now, Jenny, lass, give us a squall.” But for all this, in former times Jane and he had got on very well together on the occasions when they had been without company at Pincote. He was moving about a good deal in the world at that time, mixing with various people, talking to and being talked to by different friends and acquaintances, and was at no loss for subjects to talk about, even though those subjects might not be particularly interesting to his daughter. But Jane made a capital listener, and could always give him a good commonplace answer, and that was all he craved—that and three-fourths of the talk to himself.

Of late, however, as we have already seen, the Squire, had all but given up going into society, by which means he at once dried up the source from which he had been in the habit of obtaining his conversational ideas. When he came to dine alone with Jane he found himself with nothing to talk about. Under such circumstances there was nothing left for him but grumbling. But even grumbling becomes tiresome after a time, especially when the person to whom such complainings are addressed never takes the trouble to contradict you, and is incapable of being grumbled at herself.

It was after one of these tedious evenings that the Squire said to Jane, "We may as well have Bristow up to-morrow, I think. I want to see him about one or two things, and he may as well stop for dinner. So you had better drop him a line."

The Squire had nothing of any importance to see Tom about, but he was too stubborn to own, even to himself, that it was the young man's lively company that he was secretly longing for. The weather next morning happened to be very bad, and Jane smiled demurely to herself as she noted how anxious her father was lest the rain should keep Tom from coming. Jane knew that neither rain nor anything else would keep him away. "Papa is almost as anxious to see him as I am," she said to herself. "He thinks that he can live without him, but he will find that he cannot."

Sure enough, Tom did not fail to be there. The Squire gave him a hearty greeting, and took him into the study before he had an opportunity of seeing Jane. "I've heard nothing more from those railway people about the Croft," he said. "Penfold was here yesterday and wanted to know whether he was to go on with the villas—all the foundations are now in, you know. I hardly knew what instructions to give him."

"If you were to ask me, sir," said Tom, "I should certainly say, let him begin to run up the carcases as quickly as possible. I happen to know that the company must have the Croft—that they cannot possibly do without it. They are only hanging fire awhile, hoping to get you to go to them and make them an offer, instead of their being compelled to come to you; which, in a transaction of this nature, makes all the difference."

"I don't think you are far wrong in your views," said Mr. Culpepper. "I'll turn over in my mind what you've said." Which meant that the Squire would certainly adopt Tom's advice.

"No love-making, you know, Bristow," whispered the old man, with a dig in the ribs, as they entered the dining-room.

"You may trust me, sir," said Tom.

"I'm not so sure on that score. We are none of us saints when a pretty girl is in question."

Tom did not fail to keep the Squire alive during dinner. To the old man his fund of news seemed inexhaustible. In reality, his resources in that line were never put to the test: three or four skilfully introduced topics sufficed. The Squire's own long-winded remarks, unknown to himself, filled up three-fourths of the time. Then Tom made a splendid listener. His attention never flagged. He was always ready with his "I quite agree with you, sir;" or his "Just so, sir;" or his "Those are my sentiments exactly, sir." To be able to talk for half an hour at a time to an appreciative listener on some topic that interested him strongly was a treat that the Squire thoroughly enjoyed.

After the cloth was drawn he decided that, instead of remaining by himself for half an hour, he would go with the young people to the drawing-room. He could have his snooze just as well there as in the dining-room, and he flattered himself that his presence, even though he might be asleep, would be a sufficient safeguard against any of that illicit love-making respecting which Bristow had been duly cautioned.

As a still further precaution, he had nudged Tom again, as they went into the drawing-room, and had whispered, "None of your tomfoolery, remember." Five minutes later he was fast asleep.

They could not play, or sing, or talk much, while the Squire slept, so they fell back upon chess. "There's to be no love-making, you know, Jenny," whispered Tom, across the table, with a twinkle in his eye.

"None whatever," whispered Jane back, with a little shake of the head, and a demure smile.

A mutual understanding having thus been come to, there was no need for any further conversation, except about the incident of the game, which, truth to tell, was very badly played on both sides. In place of studying the board, as a chess-player ought to do, Jane found her eyes, quite unconsciously to herself, studying the face of her opponent; while Tom's hand, wandering purposely about the board, frequently found itself taking hold of Jane's hand instead of a knight or a pawn; so that when at last the game did contrive to work itself out to an ineffectual conclusion, they could hardly have said with certainty which one of them had checkmated the other. The Squire woke up, smiling and well-pleased. He had not heard them talking to each other, and there could be no harm in their playing a simple game of chess. If he were content, they had no reason to be otherwise.

After this the Squire would insist on having Tom up at Pincote as often as the latter could possibly contrive to be there. In spite of himself the old man's heart warmed imperceptibly towards Tom, and when it so happened that business took him away from home for two or three days, then the Squire grew so fretful and peevish that all Jane's tact and good temper were needed to make life at all endurable. She tried her best to persuade him to invite some of his old friends to come and see him, or go himself and call upon some of them, but in vain. Bristow he wanted, and no one but Bristow would he have. He looked upon himself as a ruined man—as a man whom it behoved to economise in every possible way. To keep company costs money. Tom Bristow was a sensible fellow, with whom it was not necessary to stand on ceremony, or be at any extra expense—a man who was content with a chop and a rice-pudding, and a glass of St. Julien. "He doesn't come here for what he gets to eat and drink. I like his society, and he likes mine. He finds that he can learn a good many things from me, and he's not above learning."

All this time the works at Knockley Holt were being pushed busily forward, much to the bewilderment and aggravation of the good people of Duxley. They were aggravated, and they considered they had a right to be aggravated, because they could not understand, and had not been told, what it was that was intended to be done there. In a small town like Duxley, no inhabitant has a right to put before his fellow-citizens a problem which they find incapable of solution, and then, when asked to solve it for them, declining to do so. Such conduct merits the severest social reprehension.

Surely, next to the madness of building a row of villas on Prior's Croft, was the puzzling folly of digging a hole in Knockley Holt. After much discussion pro and con, amongst the townspeople—chiefly over sundry glasses of whisky toddy, in sundry bar-parlours, after business hours—it seemed to be settled that Culpepper's Hole, as some wag had christened it, could be intended for nothing else than an artesian well—though what was the exact nature of an artesian well, it would have puzzled some of the Duxley wiseacres to tell; and why water should be bored for there, and to what uses it could be put when so obtained, they would have been still more at a loss to say. The Squire could not drive into Duxley without being tackled by one or another of his friends as to what he was about at Knockley Holt. But the old man would only wink and shake his head, and try to look wise, and say, "It doesn't do to blab everything now-a-days, but between you and me and the post—this is in confidence, mind—I'm digging a tunnel to the Antipodes." Then he would chuckle and give the reins a shake, and Diamond would trot off with him, leaving his questioner angry or amused, as the case might be.

It was not known to anyone in Duxley, except the Squire's lawyer, that Knockley Holt was now the property of Tom Bristow. That the works there were under Tom's direction was a well-known fact, but he was merely looked upon as Mr. Culpepper's foreman in the matter. "Gets a couple of hundred or so a year for looking after the Squire's affairs," one wiseacre would remark to another. "If not, how does he live? Seems to have nothing to do when he's not at Pincode. A poor way of getting a living. Serve him right, he should have stopped with old Hoskyns when he had the chance, and not have thought he was going to set the Thames on fire with his six thousand pounds."

No one could be possessed by a more burning desire than the Squire himself to know the meaning of the works at Knockley Holt, but having asked once, and asked in vain, his pride would not allow him to make any further inquiry. Not a day passed on which he saw Tom that he did not try, by one or two vague hints, to lead up to the subject; but when Tom turned to talk into another channel, then the old man would see that the time for him to be enlightened had not yet come.

But it did come at last, and after what was, in reality, no very long waiting. On a certain afternoon—to be precise in our dates, it was the fifth of May—Tom walked over to Pincote, in search of the Squire. He found him in his study, wearying his brain over a column of figures, which would persist in coming to a different total every time it was added up. The first thing Tom did was to take the column of figures and bring it to a correct total. This done, his next act was to produce something from his pocket that was carefully wrapped up in a piece of newspaper. He pushed the parcel across the table to the Squire. “Would you oblige me, sir,” he said, “by opening that paper, and giving me your opinion as to the contents?”

“Why, bless my heart, this is neither more nor less than a lump of coal!” said the Squire, when he had opened the paper.

“Exactly so, sir. As you say, this is neither more nor less than a lump of coal. But where do you think it came from?”

“There you puzzle me. Though I don’t know that it can matter to me where it came from.”

“But it matters very much to you, sir. This lump of coal came from Knockley Holt.”

The Squire was rather dull of comprehension. “Well, what is there so wonderful about that?” he said. “I dare say it has been stolen by some of those confounded gipsies, and left there when they moved.

“What I mean is this, sir,” answered Tom, with just a shade of impatience in his tone. “This piece of coal is but a specimen of a splendid seam, which has been struck by my men at the bottom of the shaft at Knockley Holt.”

The Squire stared at him, and gave a long, low whistle. “Do you mean to say that you have found a bed of coal at the bottom of the hole you have been digging at Knockley Holt?”

“That is precisely what I have found, sir, and it is precisely what I have been trying to find from the first.”

“I see it all now!” said the Squire. “What a lucky young scamp you are! But what on earth put it into your head to go looking for coal at Knockley Holt?”

“I had a friend of mine, who is a very clever mining engineer, staying with me for a little while some time ago. But my friend is not only an engineer—he is a practical geologist as well. When out for a constitutional one day, we found ourselves at Knockley Holt. My friend was struck with its appearance—so different from that of the country around it, even to a different kind of vegetation on the surface. ‘There is coal under here,’ he said, ‘and at no great distance from the surface either. Whoever is the owner ought to think himself a lucky man—that is, if he knows the value of it.’ Well, sir, not content with what my friend said, I paid a heavy fee and had one of the most eminent geologists of the day down from London to examine

and report upon it. His report coincided exactly with my friend's opinion. You know the rest, sir. I came to you with a view of getting a lease of the ground, and found you desirous of selling it. I was only too glad of having the chance of buying it. I set a lot of men and a steam-engine to work without a day's delay, and that lump of coal, sir, is the happy result."

The Squire rubbed his spectacles for a moment or two without speaking. "Bristow, that's an old head of yours on those young shoulders," he said at last. "With all my heart I congratulate you on your good fortune. I know no man who deserves it more than you do. Yes, Bristow, I congratulate you, though I can't help saying that I wish that I had a friend to have told me what was told you before I let you have the ground. For want of such a friend I have lost a fortune."

"That is just what I have come to see you about, sir," said Tom, as he rose and pushed back his chair. The Squire looked up at him in surprise. "Although I bought Knockley Holt from you as a speculation, I had a pretty good idea when I bought it as to what I should find below the surface. If I had not found what I expected, my bargain would have been a dear one; but having found what I expected, it is just the opposite. In fact, sir, you have lost a fortune, and I have found one."

"I know it—I know it!" groaned the Squire, "But you needn't twit me with it."

"So far the speculation was a perfectly legitimate one, as speculations go now-a-days. But that is not the sort of thing I wish to exist between you and me. You have been very kind to me in many ways, and I have much to thank you for. I could not bear to treat you in this matter as I should treat a stranger. I could not bear to think that I was making a fortune out of a piece of ground that but a few short weeks ago was your property. The money so made would seem to me to bring a curse with it, rather than a blessing. I should feel as if nothing would ever prosper with me afterwards. Sir, I will not have this coal-mine. There are plenty of other channels open to me for making money. Here are the title-deeds of the property. I give them back to you. You shall repay me the twelve hundred pounds purchase-money, and reimburse me for the expenses I have been put to in sinking the shaft. But as for the pit itself, I will have nothing to do with it."

Tom had produced the title-deeds from his pocket, and had laid them on the table while speaking. He now pushed them across to the Squire. Then he took the deed of sale, tore it across, and threw the fragments into the grate.

It is doubtful whether Titus Culpepper had ever been more astonished in the whole course of his life than he was at the present moment. For

a little while he seemed utterly at a loss for words, but when he did speak, his words were not lacking in force.

"Bristow, you are a confounded fool!" he said, with emphasis.

"I have been told that many times before."

"You are a confounded fool—but you are a gentleman."

Tom bowed.

"You propose to give me back the title-deeds of Knockley Holt, after having found what may literally be termed a gold-mine there—eh?"

"I don't propose to do it, sir. I have done it already. There are the title-deeds," pointing to the table. "There is the deed of sale," pointing to the fire-grate.

"And do you think, sir," said the Squire, with dignity, "that Titus Culpepper is the man to accept such a romantic piece of generosity from one who is little more than a boy? Not so! It would be impossible for me to forgive myself, were I to do anything of the kind. The property is fairly and legally yours, and yours it must remain."

"It shall not, sir! By heaven! I will not have it. There are the title deeds. Do with them as you will." He buttoned his coat, and took up his hat, and turned to leave the room.

"Stop, Bristow, stop!" said the Squire, as he rose from his chair. Tom halted, with the handle of the door in his hand, but he did not go back to the table.

Mr. Culpepper walked to the window and stood there looking out for full three minutes without uttering a word. Then he turned and beckoned Tom to go to him.

"Bristow," he said, laying his hand affectionately on Tom's shoulder, "as I said before, you are a gentleman—a gentleman in mind and feeling. More than that a man cannot be, whether his family be old or new. You propose to do a certain thing which I can only accede to on one condition."

"Name it, sir," said Tom, briefly.

"I cannot take Knockley Holt from you without giving you something like an equivalent in return. Now, I only possess one thing that you would care to receive at my hands—and that is the most precious thing I have on earth. Exchange is no robbery. I will agree to take back Knockley Holt from you, if you will take in exchange for it—my daughter Jane."

"Oh! Mr. Culpepper!"

"That you love her, I know already; and I daresay the sly hussy is equally as fond of you. If such be the case, take her. I know no man who so thoroughly deserves her, or who has so much right to her as you have."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE EIGHTH OF MAY.

THE eighth of May had come round at last.

Of all days in the year this was the one that Kester St. George intended least to spend at Park Newton, but, as circumstances fell out, he could not well avoid doing so.

After the death and burial of Mother Mim—the expenses of the last named ceremony being defrayed out of Kester's pocket—it had been his intention to at once leave Park Newton for ever, as he hoped. But it so fell out that in the document purloined by him from the pocket of Skeggs when that individual lay dead on the moor, there was given the name of a certain person, still living, who could depose, of his own personal knowledge, to the truth of the facts as put down in the dying woman's confession. This person was the only witness to the facts there stated who was now alive. The name of the man in question was William Bendall, and the point that Kester had now to clear up was : Who was this William Bendall, and where was he to be found? There was no address given in the Confession, nor any hint as to the man's whereabouts ; but Skeggs had doubtless known where he was to be found, and had, in fact, told Kester that he could put his hand on the man at a day's notice.

With such a sword as this hanging over his head, Kester felt that it was impossible for him to leave Park Newton. When the man should learn that Mother Mim was dead, which he probably would do in the course of a few days, and when the restraining power which had doubtless kept him silent should be removed for ever, what was to prevent him from telling all that he knew ; or, at least, from giving such broad hints as to the information in his possession as might lead to inquiry—to many inquiries, perchance : to far more than Kester would care to encounter—unless he should ever be so unfortunate as to be driven to bay?

But as yet he was not driven to bay, nor anything like it. It behoved him, therefore, or so it seemed to him, to make certain cautious inquiries as to the whereabouts of Mr. William Bendall, with the view of ascertaining what kind of a man he was, or whether there was any danger to be apprehended from him. And if so, how could it best be met?

It was quite evident that it would be unadvisable for Kester to leave Park Newton while these inquiries were afoot. He might be wanted at any hour, should Mr. Bendall, when found, prove intractable ; so he stayed on at the old place, very much against his will in other respects. But, to a certain extent, his patience had already been rewarded. Mr.

Bendall's address had been discovered, and Mr. Bendall himself had been found to be first cousin to Mother Mim, and railway ganger by profession. But just at this time he was away from home—his home being at Swackstone, a great centre of railway industry, about twenty miles from Duxley—he having been sent out to Russia in charge of a cargo of railway plant. He was now expected home in the course of a few days, and Kester determined not to leave the neighbourhood till he had found out for himself what manner of man he was.

We may here finally dispose of Skeggs. His body was not found till two days after Kester's visit to it. Here, too, was found his broken leg, so that the nature of the accident he had met with was clearly seen, and it was at once understood how he had come by his death. No one expect the girl Nell had seen Kester St. George in his company; so, as it fell out, that gentleman's name was never even whispered in connection with the affair.

The future of Nell had been a point that Mr. St. George had anxiously discussed in his own mind, after Mother Mim's death. What to do with such a strange girl he knew not, nor how best to secure her silence. Did she really know anything, as she owned that she did, or did she not? If anything, how much did she know, and to what use did she intend to put her knowledge? Kester had no opportunity of talking to her in private before the funeral, so he made an appointment with her for the morning following that event. She was to meet him at a certain milestone on the Duxley Road at eleven o'clock.

Kester was there to the minute; but Miss Nell was not there, nor did she come at all. Kester went back home in a fume, and after luncheon he rode over to Mother Mim's cottage without once slackening rein. There he found the old woman who had been looking after matters previously to the funeral. From her he ascertained that Nell had disappeared about two hours after her return from seeing the last of her grandmother, taking with her her new black frock and a few other things tied up in a bundle, and had given no hint as to where she was going, or whether it was her intention ever to come back.

The girl's disappearance had been a source of considerable disquietude to Kester for several days; but as time passed on without bringing any sign of her, or any information as to where she had gone, his uneasiness gradually wore itself away, till he came at last to persuade himself that, from that quarter at least, there was no possible danger to be apprehended.

But had it not been for another and a much more potent reason, Kester St. George would certainly not have spent the eighth of May at Park Newton, not even though he could not have left it till the seventh, and had been compelled to come back to it on the ninth. He would have gone somewhere—anywhere—if only for a dozen hours—if

only from sunset to sunrise, had it in any way been possible for him to do so.

But it so happened that it was not possible for him to do so. On the fifth he received a letter from his uncle, which astonished him very much. General St. George was still staying at Salisbury with his sick friend, Major Beauchamp. He wrote as under :

"All being well, I shall be back at Park Newton on the eighth instant, just for one day. I don't know whether your cousin Richard has told you that he is tired of England, and has decided upon going out to New Zealand, and he has persuaded me to go with him."

"The old fool ! To think of going to New Zealand at his time of life !" muttered Kester. " Of course, it's Master Richard's dodge to take him with him, so to make sure of his money when he dies. Well, if I can only get rid of the young one, the old one may go with him, and welcome." Then he went on with his uncle's letter :

"I shall reach Park Newton on the eighth, about four P.M., when I hope to spend the evening with you. It will be my last evening at the old place, and there are several things I wish to talk to you about. We—that is, Richard and I—leave by the two o'clock train next morning direct for Gravesend, where the ship will be waiting for us. By this day next week, I shall have bidden a final farewell to dear Old England."

"So deucedly sudden. I hardly know what to make of it !" said Kester, as he folded up the letter. " I would give much if it was any other day than the eighth. I never thought to spend that day here. But there's no help for it. Well, it will be better to spend it in company than to spend it here alone. Nothing could have persuaded me to do that."

"Yes, if the old boy goes to the other side of the world, there's no chance of any of his money coming to me," he said to himself later on. "That scowling cousin of mine will come in for the lot. Poor devil ! I don't suppose he's got enough of his own to pay his passage out. I wouldn't mind giving a thousand pounds myself to be rid of him for ever."

The eighth dawned at last, cold and dull as English May days so often are. Breakfast was hardly over before Kester ordered his horse, and away he started without telling anyone where he was going. He was out all day, and did not get back till five o'clock, an hour after the arrival of his uncle, with whom had come Mr. Perrins, the family lawyer. Him Kester knew of old, but had not seen for a long time. He was rather surprised to see him now, but it struck him that his uncle had probably some private arrangements to make before leaving England, in which the aid of Mr. Perrins might be required.

"This is very sudden, uncle, about your leaving England," said Kester.

"Yes, it is very sudden," replied the General. "It is not more than three weeks since Dick told me that he intended to go out. The reasons he gave me for coming to that conclusion were such that I could not blame him. I have no son of my own, and somehow, since poor Lionel left us, I seem to cling to that boy; and so it fell out that I presently made up my mind to go with him. I cannot bear the idea of living alone. I have only you and him—and you, Kester, are too much of a Bohemian, too much a citizen of the world—a wandering Arab, who strikes his tent a dozen times a year—for me ever to think of staying with you. Dick is far more of an old fogey than you are, and he and I—I don't doubt—will get on very well together."

"All the same, uncle, I shall be deucedly sorry to lose you."

Kester was destined to be still more surprised when he came down to dinner, for there he found Mr. Hoskyns and the Reverend Mr. Wharton, the octogenarian Vicar of Duxley. Mr. Hoskyns he had seen incidentally during the course of the trial, but not since. The vicar he had known from boyhood.

It was by Lionel's express desire that the two lawyers and the vicar had been invited to-day to Park Newton. What he was going to tell Kester to-night should be told to them also. They were all, in a certain sense, friends of the family; they were all men of honour; with them his secret would be safe. In simple justice to himself, he felt that it was not enough that his uncle and Bristow should be the sole depositaries of that secret. There ought to be at least two or three family friends to whose custody it might be implicitly trusted, and whose good wishes and friendship would be sweet to him even in exile.

None of the three gentlemen had any suspicion as to the one particular reason why they had been invited to Park Newton: not one of them had any suspicion that Richard Dering was none other than the Lionel whom they all so sincerely mourned. They had simply been invited to a little dinner party given by General St. George on the eve of his departure from England for ever.

The last to arrive at Park Newton—and he did not arrive till two minutes before dinner was served—was Mr. Tom Bristow. He had driven Miss Culpepper from Pincote to Fern Cottage, and had stayed talking with Edith till the last minute.

Tom was an entire stranger to Kester St. George. The General introduced them to each other. Tom had seen Kester several times, knowing well who he was, but the latter had no recollection of having ever seen Tom.

Neither the General, nor Tom, nor even Edith herself, had any idea as to the particular mode which Lionel would adopt for telling his cousin that which he had made up his mind to tell him. On that point he had kept his own counsel, having spoken no word to anyone. It was a subject on which even his wife felt that she could not question

him. During the past week he had been even more silent and distract than usual. His thoughts were evidently occupied with one subject, to the exclusion of all others. He seemed hardly to notice, or be aware of, what was going on around him. For Edith the time was a very anxious one. All the preparations for the approaching voyage devolved upon her : that she did not mind in the least ; what she prayed and longed for was that the fatal eighth might come and go in peace : might come and go without any encounter between her husband and his cousin. Lionel and Tom were to ride across from Park Newton to Fern Cottage at the close of the evening—Tom, in order that he might escort Jane back to Pincote ; Lionel, because he should then have bidden the old house a last farewell, because he should then have done with the past for ever, and because he should then be ready to start with his wife for their new home on the other side of the world.

"And will nothing that any of us can say or do persuade you to reconsider your determination ?" said Jane to Edith, as they sat, hand in hand, after Tom had gone forward to Park Newton. Mrs. Garside had gone into Duxley to make some final purchases, and they had the little parlour all to themselves.

"I'm afraid not," answered Edith with a melancholy smile.

"It seems so hard to lose you, just when everything is made straight and clear—just as your husband is able to prove his innocence to the world ! Yes, and were I in his place I would so prove it. I would cry it aloud on the housetops, and let that other one pay the penalty which he deserves to pay. I would never banish myself from my native country for his sake ; he is not worthy of such a sacrifice."

"You must not talk like that," said Edith, with a little extra squeeze of Jane's hand ; "but it is easy to see who has been inoculating you with his wild doctrines."

"They are my own original sentiments, and not second-hand ones," said Jane, emphatically. "There's nothing wild about them ; they are plain common sense."

"There could be no happiness for either Lionel or me were we to follow the course suggested by you. Depend upon it, Jane, that what we are about to do is best for all concerned."

"I will never believe that it is good for me to lose my friends in this way. Do you know, I feel almost tempted to go with you ?"

"I wish, with all my heart, that you were going with us : but I'm afraid Mr. Culpepper is too deeply rooted in English soil to bear transplanting to a foreign clime."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Jane, with a little sigh, "only I should so like to travel : I should so like a six months' voyage to somewhere."

"The voyage is just what I dread, only it would not do to tell Lionel so."

" You might have fixed on some place a little nearer than New Zealand—some place within four or five days' journey, where one could run over for a little holiday now and then and see you. It is very ridiculous of you to go so far away."

" When you say that, dear, you forget certain peculiarities of the case. If Lionel were to settle down at any place where there would be the least possibility of his being recognized, it would necessitate a perpetual disguise. This, in a little while, would become intolerable. He must go to a place where there will be no need for him to stain his face, or dye his hair, and where he can go about freely, and without fear of detection."

" I can quite understand what an immense relief it must be to you to get away from this neighbourhood, with all its painful associations—to hide yourself in some remote valley, where no shadow of the past can darken your door ; but it seems to me that you need not go quite so far away in order to do that."

" It will be all for the best, dear, depend upon it."

" No ; I cannot see it. If you had only gone to America, now ! No one would recognize Mr. Dering there, and it would not be too far away for me to pay you a visit once every now and again. In fact, I should make it a condition of marrying Tom, that he gave me a promise to that effect. But, New Zealand ! "

As the evening wore itself on, so did Edith's uneasiness increase, but she did her best to hide it from Jane and Mrs. Garside. Lionel had told her that she must not expect him much before midnight, and up to the time of the clock striking eleven she contrived to take her share in the conversation with tolerable composure, but after that time she was unable to altogether control herself. What terrible scenes might not even then be enacting at Park Newton ! To what danger might not her husband be exposed, while, only a mile away, they three were idly chatting about twenty indifferent topics ! How intolerable it was to be a woman, to be condemned to inaction, to have no share in the dangers of those one loved, to be able to do nothing but wait—wait—wait ! If she went to the window once she went twenty times, to listen for the sound of coming hoofs. The roads were hard and dry, and it would be possible to hear the horsemen while they were still some distance away. To and fro she paced the little room like an imprisoned leopardess. White-faced, eager-eyed, her long slender fingers clasping and unclasping themselves unceasingly, she looked like some priestess of old, who sees in her mind's eye a vision of doom—a vision of things to come, pregnant with woe unutterable. The two women watched her in silence ; her mood infected them, it could not be otherwise ; but there was nothing for them to do ; they could only wait and listen.

" I can bear this no longer," said Edith at last ; " the room suffocates

me. I must get out into the fresh air. I must go and meet Lionel." She snatched up a shawl of Mrs. Garside's, that lay on the sofa, and flung it over her head and shoulders.

"Let me go with you," cried Jane, "I am almost as anxious as you are."

"Hush! hush!" cried Edith, suddenly. "I hear them coming!" Hardly breathing, they all listened.

"I can hear nothing but the low moaning of the wind," cried Mrs. Garside, after a few moments.

"Nor I," said Jane.

"I tell you they are coming," said Edith. "There are two of them. Listen! Surely you can hear them now!" She flung open the window as she spoke, then could be plainly heard the sound of hoofs on the hard highroad. A minute or two later the horsemen drew rein at the cottage door. Martha Vince, candle in hand, lighted them up the stairs, at the top of which the ladies stood waiting to receive them.

Very stern and very pale looked the face of Lionel Dering, as, followed by Tom Bristow, he walked slowly upstairs as a man in a dream. He was no longer disguised: face, hands, and hair were their natural colour. To see him thus sent a thrill to every heart there. To each, and all of them, he seemed like a man newly risen from the grave.

Hardly had he reached the top of the stairs before Edith's white arms were round his neck.

"My darling! what is it?" she said. "What dreadful thing has happened?" He stooped his head still lower, and whispered something in her ear. She stared up into his face for a moment, then his arms tightened suddenly round her, and they all saw that she had fainted.

At Park Newton the evening wore sleepily, slowly, and gloomily away. Tom and Mr. Hoskyns, assisted occasionally by Mr. Perrins and the vicar, did their best to keep the conversation from flagging, but at times with indifferent success. None of them could forget what day it was—could forget what took place that night twelve months ago, only a few yards from where they were sitting; and so remembering, who could wonder that the dinner seemed tasteless and the wines without flavour; that the lights seemed to burn low; and that to the imagination of more than one there a shrouded figure was with them in the room; invisible to mortal eyes, but none the less surely there; drinking when they drank, pledging a health when they pledged one, and knowing well all the time which one of the company would be the first to join it in that Land of Shadows to which it now belonged.

Kester was altogether gloomy and preoccupied, and Lionel hardly spoke at all except when spoken to. General St. George was obliged

to keep up some show of conversation, out of compliment to his guests ; but no one but himself knew how irksome it was to do so. What did Lionel intend to do ? Would there be a scene—a fracas—between the two cousins? What would be the end of the wretched business? How fervently he wished that the morrow was safely come, that he had seen that unhappy man's face for the last time, and that he, and Lionel, and Edith, were fairly started on their long journey to the other side of the world !

The vicar and the two men of law had naturally expected that the party would break up by ten o'clock at the latest. Not that it mattered greatly to either Perrins or Hoskyns, who were to stay at Park Newton all night. But the vicar was an old man, and anxious to get home in decent time ; so that when he began to fidget and look at his watch, Lionel, who was only waiting for him to make a move, knew that it would be impossible to detain him much longer.

"I must really ask you to excuse me, General," said the old man at last ; "but I see that it is past ten o'clock, and quite time for gay young sparks like me to be thinking of their nightcaps."

"I hope you are not particular to a few minutes, vicar," said Lionel. "I have ordered coffee to be served in my room, and, with my uncle's permission, we will all adjourn there."

"You must not keep me long," said the vicar.

"I will not," said Lionel. "But I know that you like to finish up your evening with a little *café noir* ; and I have, besides, a picture which I want to show you, and which I think will interest you very much—a picture which I want to show not only to you, Mr. Wharton, but to all the other gentlemen who are here to-night."

They all rose and made a move towards the door.

"As I don't care for *café noir*, and don't understand pictures, you will perhaps excuse me," said Kester, ignoring Lionel, and addressing himself to his uncle.

"You had better go with us," said Lionel, turning to his cousin. "You are surely not going to be the first to break up the party."

"I don't want to break up the party. I will wait here till you come back," answered Kester, doggedly.

"You had better go with us," said Lionel, meaningly, but speaking so that the others could not hear him.

"Pray who made you dictator here ?" said Kester, haughtily. "I don't choose to go with you. That is enough."

"You had better go with us," said Lionel for the third time. "If you still decline, I can only assume that you are afraid to go."

"Afraid !" sneered Kester. "Of whom and what should I be afraid?"

"That is best known to yourself."

"Anyhow, I'm neither afraid of you nor anything that you can do."

"If you decline going to my rooms, I can only conclude that you are kept away by some abject fear."

"Lead on. I'll follow. But mark my words, you and I will have this little matter out in the morning—alone."

"Willingly."

The rooms occupied by Lionel were in the opposite wing of the house to those occupied by Kester. They were, in fact, in the same wing as, and no great distance from, the room where Percy Osmond had been murdered,—a good and sufficient reason why Kester should get as far away as possible.

Lionel's sitting-room was a good-sized apartment, but it was divided into two by large folding-doors, now closed. A moderator lamp stood on the table, together with coffee, cognac, and cigars.

"Gentlemen, I must ask you to excuse me for a few minutes," said Lionel. "My picture requires a little preparation before I can show it to you." So speaking, he left the room. There was no servant. Each of the gentlemen, Kester excepted, helped himself to a cup of coffee.

Kester seated himself apart on a chair near the door. His eyes were bent on the floor. He played absently with his watch-guard. Just now, as he was coming slowly upstairs, a shadowy hand had been laid on his shoulder, a ghostly voice had whispered in his ear. It was only that one little word that he had heard whispered oft-times before. *Come*, was all the voice said, but it was followed this time, by a little malicious laugh, such as Kester had never heard before. Round his heart there was a cold, numb feeling, that was altogether strange to him; a dull singing in his ears, like the faint echo of a tide beating on some far-away shore. No one spoke to him. No one seemed to know that he was there. He felt at that moment, with an unspeakable bitterness, how utterly alone he was in the world. There was no human being anywhere who, if he were to die that moment, would really regret him—not one single creature who would drop a solitary tear over his grave. But such thoughts were miserable; they must be driven away somehow. He rose and went to the table, poured himself out half a tumbler of brandy, and drank it off without water. "It puts fresh life into me as it goes down," he muttered to himself.

He was in the act of replacing the glass on the table when a sudden noise caused all eyes to turn in one direction. The folding-doors were being unbolted from the inner side. Then they were opened till they stood about half a yard apart, but within, all as yet was in darkness. Then from out this darkness issued the voice of Lionel—or, as they all took it to be, the voice of Richard—but Lionel himself was unseen.

"Gentlemen," said the voice, "you all know what day this is. It is the eighth of May. Twelve months ago to-night, Percy Osmond

was murdered. About that crime I have often thought and often dreamed. I dreamed about it only a little while ago, and in my dream I seemed to see how the murder really took place. What I then saw in my sleep, I have painted. What I have painted I am now going to show to you."

The folding-doors were closed for a minute, and then flung wide open. The farther room was now a blaze of light. Facing this light, so that every minute detail could be plainly seen, was a large unframed canvas, on which, in colours the most vivid, was painted Lionel Dering's Dream.

The scene was Percy Osmond's bedroom, and the moment selected by the artist was where, after the brief struggle between Osmond and Kester, the latter has obtained possession of the dagger, and, while pinning Osmond down with one knee and one arm, has, with his other hand, forced the dagger deep into his opponent's heart. Peeping from behind the curtains could be seen the white, terrified face of Pierre Janvard. The figures were all life-size, and the likenesses unmistakable.

Awe-struck they crowded round the folding-doors, and gazed silently at the picture, forgetting for the moment that the man thus strongly accused was one of themselves.

"Now you see how the murder really happened—now you know who the murderer really was," said Lionel, speaking from some point in the farther room where he could not be seen. "This is no dream, but a most dread reality, that you see pictured before you. I have proofs—ample proofs—of the truth of that which I now state. The murderer of Percy Osmond stands among you. Kester St. George is that man!"

At these words, every eye was turned instinctively on Kester. He was still standing at the table where he had put down his glass. His right hand was hidden in his waistcoat. With his left hand he supported himself against the table. A strange lividity had overspread his face; his lips twitched nervously. His frightened eyes wandered from one face to another of those who were now gazing on him. He tried to speak, but could not. Then his eyes fixed themselves on the brandy. Tom interpreted the look and poured some into a glass. He drank it greedily, and then he spoke:

"What you have just been told," he said, "is nothing but a cruel, cowardly, devilish lie! Where is this man who accuses me? Why does he hide himself? He hides himself because he is a liar—because he dare not face either you or me. We all know who was the murderer—we all know that Lionel Dering—"

"Lionel Dering is here to answer for himself. It is he who tells you to your face that you are the murderer of Percy Osmond!"

Yes, there, framed by the archway, full in the blaze of light, stood Lionel, no longer disguised—the dye washed off his face, his hands, his hair—the Lionel that they all remembered so well, come back from

the dead—his own dear self, and none but he, as they could all see at a glance, and yet looking strangely different without his long fair beard.

For a full minute Kester St. George stood as rigid as a statue, glaring across the room at the man whom he had so bitterly wronged.

One word his lips tried to form, but only half succeeded in doing so. That one word was—*Forgive*. Then a strange spasm passed across his face ; he pressed his hand to his left side, and, turning suddenly half round, fell back into the arms of the man nearest to him.

“ He has fainted,” said the General.

“ He is dead,” said Tom.

“ Heaven knows, I had no thought or knowledge of this,” said Lionel. “ None whatever ! ”

C H A P T E R X X X I X.

GATHERED THREADS.

THE horribly sudden death of Kester St. George, left Lionel Dering with two courses to choose between. On the one hand he could carry out his original intention of going abroad, under an assumed name, leaving the world still to believe that he was dead. On the other hand, he could give himself up to justice, under his real name, and—his first trial never having been finished, take his stand at the bar again under the original charge with the proofs he had gathered in his possession—let his innocence of the crime imputed to him work itself out through a legitimate channel to a verdict of Not Guilty. This latter course was the only one open to him, if he wished to clear himself in the eyes of the world from the stain of blood ; or even if he wished to assume his own name and his position at Park Newton. But did he really wish this thing ? That idea of going abroad, of burying himself and his wife in some far-away nook of the New World, had taken such hold on his imagination, that even now it had by no means lost its sweetness in his thoughts. Then, again, Kester having died without a will, if he—Lionel—were to leave himself undeclared, the estate would go to General St. George, as next of kin, and after the old soldier’s time it would go, in the natural course of events, to his brother Richard. Why, then, declare himself ? why give himself into custody and undergo the pain and annoyance of another term of imprisonment, and another trial—and they would be both painful and annoying, even though his innocence were proved at the end of them ? Why not rather bind over to silence those few trusted friends to whom his secret was already known, and going abroad with Edith, spend the remainder of his days in happy obscurity ? Why re-open that blood-stained page of family history, over which the world had of a surety gloated sufficiently already ?

But in this latter view he was opposed by everybody except his wife; by his uncle, by Tom, by the vicar, and by nobody more strongly than by Messrs. Perrins and Hoskyns. The cry from all was—take your trial; let your innocence be proved, as proved it must be, and assume the name and position that are rightfully yours. Edith, with her head resting on his shoulder, only said: “Do that which seems best to you in your own heart, dearest, and that alone. Whether you go or stay, my place is by your side—my love unalterable. Only to be with you—never to lose you again—is all I ask. Give me that: I crave for nothing more.”

Strange to say, the person who brought matters to a climax, and finally decided Lionel as to his future course of action, was the girl Nell, Mother Mim's plain-spoken grand-daughter. Through some channel or other she had heard of the death of Mr. St. George, and one day she marched up the steps at Park Newton, and rang the big bell, and asked, as bold as brass, to see the General. The General was one of the most accessible of men, and when told that the girl wanted to see him privately, he marched off at once to the library, and ordered her to be admitted.

It was a strange story the girl had to tell—so strange that the General at first put the girl down as a common impostor. Fortunately Mr. Perrins happened to be still at Park Newton, and he at once called the shrewd old lawyer to his assistance.

But Miss Nell was now taken with a stubborn fit, and refused either to say any more or to answer any more questions, till five pounds had been given her as an earnest of more to follow, in case her information should prove to be correct. The five pounds having been put into her hands, she told all that she knew freely enough, and answered every question that was put to her. Then she was dismissed for the time being, having first left an address where she might be found when wanted.

Nell had told them how the body of Dirty Jack had been found dead on the moor, and the first point to ascertain was, what had become of the Confession which was known to have been in his possession when he left mother Mim's cottage? Had it been found on his person? If so, where was it now? It was rather singular that Mr. St. George should be the last person known to have been seen in the company of Skeggs. The second question was, where was Mr. Bendall to be found? Mr. Perrins set to work without delay to solve this latter problem, by engaging one of Mr. Hoskyns's confidential clerks to make the requisite inquiries for him. To the first question, the whereabouts of the Confession, he determined to give his own personal attention. But, before he had an opportunity of doing this, he found among the papers of Kester the very document itself—the original Confession, duly witnessed by Skeggs and the girl Nell. A

day or two later, Mr. Bendall was also found, and—for a consideration—had no objection to tell all he knew of the affair. His evidence, and that given in the Confession, tallied exactly. There could no longer be any moral doubt as to the fact of Kester St. George having been a son of Mother Mim.

This revelation was not without its effect on the question Lionel was still debating in his own mind. It armed his uncle and Tom with one weapon more in favour of the course they were desirous that he should pursue. If Kester St. George were not Lionel's cousin, if he were not related to the family in any way, there was less reason than ever why Lionel should not declare himself, why he should not give himself up, and let his own innocence be proved once and for ever, by proving the guilt of this other man.

Even Edith, at last, added her persuasions to those of his uncle and the others, and when this became the case Lionel could hold out no longer. Exactly a week after the death of Kester St. George (as we may as well continue to call him), Lionel Dering walked into the police-station at Duxley, and gave himself up into the hands of the sergeant on duty.

Mr. Drayton was astounded, as well he might be. "How can *you* be Mr. Dering?" he said. Lionel being now close-shaved, did not tally with the superintendent's recollection of him. "I saw that gentleman lying dead in his coffin in the church of San Michele, in Italy, and I could have sworn to him anywhere."

"What you saw, Mr. Drayton, was a cleverly-executed waxen effigy, and not the man himself. Me you did see and talk to, but without recognizing me. At all events, here I am, alive and well, and if you will kindly lock me up, I shall esteem it a favour."

"I was never so sold in the whole course of my life," said Drayton. "But there's one comfort—Sergeant Whiffins was just as much sold as I was."

At the ensuing summer assizes Lionel Dering was again put on his trial for the murder of Percy Osmond. Janvard, whose safety had been carefully looked after by a private detective in the guise of a guest at his hotel, was admitted as evidence for the Crown, and, without leaving their box, a verdict of Not Guilty was found by the jury. Never had such a scene been known in Duxley as was enacted that summer afternoon, when Lionel Dering walked down the steps of the Court-house a free man. A landau was in waiting, into which he was lifted by main force. No horses were needed, or would have been allowed. Relays of the crowd dragged the carriage all the way to Park Newton, in company with two brass bands and all the flags that the town could muster. Lionel's arm had never ached so much as it did that evening, after he had shaken hands with a great multitude of his friends—and every man and boy prided himself upon being Mr.

Dering's friend that day. As for the ladies, they had their own way of showing their sympathy with him. Half the children in the parish that came to light during the next twelve months were christened either Edith or Lionel.

The post-mortem examination showed that heart disease of long standing was the proximate cause of Kester St. George's death. He was buried, not in the family vault where the St. Georges for two centuries lay in silent state, but in the town cemetery. The grave was marked by a plain slab, on which was engraved simply the initials of the name he had always been known by, and the date of his death.

"I warned him of it long ago," said Dr. Bolus to two or three fellows at Kester's old club, as he stood with his back to the fire and his coat-tails thrown over his arms. "But whose warnings are sooner forgotten than a doctor's? By living away from London, and leading a perfectly quiet and temperate life, he might have been kept going for years. But, above all things, he should have avoided excitement of every kind."

Lionel and Edith put off for a little while their long-talked-of tour, in order that they might be present at the wedding of Tom and Jane. The ceremony took place in August: Tom and his bride went to Scotland for their honeymoon; Lionel and his wife started for Switzerland, en route for Italy, where they were to spend the ensuing winter.

Of late the Squire had recovered his health wonderfully. He seemed to have grown ten years younger in a few weeks. In the working of that wonderful coal-shaft, and in the prospect of his making a far larger fortune for his daughter than the one he so foolishly lost, he found a perpetual source of healthy excitement, which, by keeping both his mind and body actively and legitimately employed, had an undoubted tendency to lengthen his life. Besides this, Tom had asked him to superintend the construction of his new house. It was just the sort of job that the Squire delighted in—to look sharply after a lot of working men, and, while pretending that they were all in a league to cheat him, blowing them up heartily all round one half-hour, and treating them to unlimited beer the next.

"I should like to see you in the Town Council, Bristow," said the Squire one day to his son-in-law.

"Thank you, sir, all the same," said Tom, "but it's hardly good enough. There will be a general election before we are much older, when I mean, either by hook or by crook, to get into the House."

"Bristow, you have the cheek of the deuce himself," was all that the astonished Squire could say.

It may just be remarked that Tom's ambition has since been gratified. He is now, and has been for some time, member for W—.

He is clever, ambitious, and a tolerable orator, as oratory is reckoned now-a-days. What may not such a man aspire to?

Mr. Hoskyns is frequently a guest both of Tom and Lionel. Chatting with the former one day over the "walnuts and the wine," said the old man: "I have often puzzled my brain over that affair of Baldry's—that positive assertion of his that he saw and spoke to me one night in the Thornfield Road, when I was most certainly not there. Have you ever thought about it since?"

"Once or twice, I daresay, but I could have enlightened you at the time had I chosen to do so. It was I whom Baldry met. I had made myself up to resemble you, and, previously to my visit in your character, I thought I would try the effect of my disguise upon somebody who had known you well for years. As it so happened, Baldry was the first of your acquaintances whom I encountered on my nocturnal ramble. The rest you know."

"You young vagabond! And yet you have the audacity to call yourself a respectable member of society. Perhaps you can explain the mystery of the ghostly footsteps at Park Newton when poor Pearce, the butler, was frightened out of the small quantity of wit that he could lay claim to?"

"That, too, I can explain. The ghostly footsteps, as it happened, were very corporeal footsteps, being those of none other than your humble servant."

"But how did you get into the room? It had been nailed up months before."

"The nailing up was more apparent than real. The nails were sham nails. The door could be unlocked at any time, and the room entered in the ordinary way."

"But how about the cough—Mr. Osmond's peculiar cough?"

"That was an imitation by me from lessons given me by Mr. Dering. It answered the purpose admirably for which it was intended."

"To hear such sounds at midnight in a room where a man had been murdered was enough to shake the strongest nerves. I wonder you were not frightened yourself to be in the room."

"That would have been ridiculous. There was nothing to be afraid of."

"In any extraordinary circumstances I shall never believe the evidence of my own senses again," concluded Mr. Hoskyns.

Mr. Cope was not long in perceiving that he had committed a grave error of judgment in refusing Mr. Culpepper the assistance he had asked for. There would be a splendid fortune for Jane after all. It was enough to make a man tear his hair with vexation—only Mr. Cope hadn't much hair to tear—to think what a golden chance he had let slip through his fingers. Edward was recalled at once, on the slight chance that, if a meeting could anyhow be brought about between him

and Jane, the old flame might spring up with renewed ardour in the young lady's bosom, in which case she might insist upon her engagement with Edward being carried out. But Edward bore his disappointment very philosophically, and had not been three hours in Duxley before he found himself eating pastry, and being ministered to by Miss Moggs, who was still unmarried, and still as plump and smiling as ever.

Three weeks later the good people of Duxley were treated to a delightful sensation. Mr. Cope, junior, had run away with the daughter of Mr. Moggs, the confectioner; and Mr. Cope, senior, had threatened to cut his son off with the well-known metaphorical shilling.

The latest news of young Mr. Cope is, that he is living in furnished apartments in a cheap suburb of London. The late Miss Moggs, her plumpness notwithstanding, has developed into a Tartar. They have six children. Mr. Cope's income is exactly two hundred a-year, left him by his mother. His father will not give him a penny, and he is either too lazy, or too incompetent, to attempt to add to his means by a little honest work. He is very stout, and very short of breath. When he has any money he spends his time in a neighbouring billiard-room, smoking a short pipe and drinking half-and-half, and watching other men play. When he has no money he stops at home and rocks the cradle, and listens to his wife's reproaches. Mrs. Cope vows that she will buy a mangle and make her husband turn it, and try whether she cannot shame him into work that way. And all this is the result of eating pastry and being waited upon by a pretty girl.

After the trial was over, Nell, by means of some speciously-contrived tale, contrived to cozen General St. George out of twenty pounds. With this she disappeared, and was never either seen or heard of in Duxley or its neighbourhood again.

During the time that Lionel and his wife were abroad, the General went with his friend, Major Beauchamp, to Madeira, and wintered there.

It had been Lionel's intention to stay abroad for about three years. But as it fell out, he and Edith were back at Park Newton by the end of twelve months, being brought thither by the expectation of an all-important event. Lionel has not since then left home for more than a month at a time. So full of painful memories was Park Newton to him, that it was only by Edith's persuasion that he was induced to settle there at all. But years have come and gone since then, and nothing would now induce him to live anywhere else. Whatever gloomy associations might otherwise have clung to the old house have been exorcised long ago by the merry laughter of children. It was difficult at first for the Echoes of that murder-haunted roof to bring themselves to mimic the soft syllables of childhood, but when one little stranger after another came to teach them, then their voices, rusty

and creaky at first through long disuse, gradually won back to themselves a long-forgotten sweetness ; and now the Echoes follow the children wherever they go, and all the grim old pile is musical with their laughter and songs and free joyous shouts of childhood. Many a time they have a bout together—the children and the Echoes—trying which of them can make the more noise ; and then the children call to the Echoes and bid them come out of their hiding places and show themselves in the dusky twilight. But the Echoes only laugh back their answer, and are ever too timid to let themselves be seen.

Who, of all people in the world, should be the children's primest favourite and slave but General St. George ? His heart is in the nursery, and there he spends hours every day. He "keeps shop" with them, he plays at soldiers with them, he is their horse, their roaring lion, their wild man of the woods. It is certainly amusing to see the old warrior ; whose very name was once a word of terror among the lawless hill-tribes of the far east ; to see him led about by one boy and by means of a piece of string tied round his arm ; and while another youthful scapegrace deafens you with the noise of a drum, to watch him imitate, with dangling paws, the uncouth gracefulness of a dancing bear. There can be no doubt on one point—that the old soldier enjoys himself quite as much as the children do.

After his year's imprisonment was at an end—to which mitigated punishment Janvard was condemned, in consideration of his having acted as witness for the Crown—he and his sister went over to Switzerland, and opened an hotel there at one of the chief centres of tourist travel. There, not long ago, he was encountered by Lionel. Smirking, bowing, and rubbing his hands, Janvard went up to him, with a request that Monsieur Dering would do him the honour of stopping at the hotel. But Lionel would have nothing to do with him, and when Janvard could be made to comprehend this, his face became a study of mortification and surprise. His feelings, such as they were, were evidently hurt ; he never could be made to understand why Monsieur Dering had refused so positively to take up his quarters at the Lion d'Or.

In a world that is full of fermentation and change, there are happily a few things that change not. One of these is the friendship between Lionel and Tom, which neither time nor absence, nor the growth of other interests has power to alter in the least. When they both happen to be in the Midlandshire at the same time, a week never passes without their seeing more or less of each other ; and between their wives there is almost as firm a friendship as there is between them. Four people more united, more happy in each other's society, it would be impossible to find.

It was only last summer, during the long spell of hot weather, that Edith and Jane, with their youngsters, went over to Gatehouse Farm

together, for the sake of the fresh sea-breezes that seem to blow perpetually round the old house. They were sitting one day on the broad yellow sands, idling through the glowing afternoon, with their embroidery and a novel, when one of Jane's little girls happened to fall and hurt her finger. She began to cry, and Edith's little boy was by her side in a moment.

"Don't cry," he said, as he stooped and kissed her. "I will marry you when I grow to be a big man."

The little girl's tears at once ceased to flow.

The two ladies looked up. Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

"Such a thing is by no means improbable," said Edith.

"I shall not be a bit surprised if it really comes to pass," replied Jane.

THE END.



PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

I.—THE PAST.

ON the toilsome road that I must traverse
Ere I reach the summit of the hill,
Let me pause and backward cast my
glances
O'er the valley lying green and still—
Lying low beneath me in its beauty—
The fair valley, by whose sparkling
streams

I so lately wandered at my pleasure,
Almost lost in spring-time's radiant
dreams.

Lost to half the music of the waters,
Though, perchance, the gladsome lul-
laby

Brought the dreams, and echoed through
the cloudland,

Filling it with magic melody :
Lost to half the richness of the meadows,

Where the wild flowers clustered round

my feet ;

Yet, perchance, it was their dainty fra-
grance

That made all my spirit-world so sweet.

Now, the dreams dissolved, I gaze se-
renely

From the rugged hill-side where I
stand,

Over waving woods, and smiling orchards,
Fallow fields, and verdant pastureland :
See the fairy lake among the alders,
And the cross-crowned, tap'ring village
spire ;
Catch the sparkle of the cottage windows,
Where the "westering" sunlight burns
like fire.

But a silvery mist is slowly rising
From the purple hollows far below,
And it casts a veil of soft enchantment
Over all the gold and crimson glow :
Ev'ry harsher outline melts to vagueness ;
Ev'ry ruder sight is lost to view ;
And, along the tender east horizon,
Blue of earth blends with the heav'n's
pure blue.

Ah, dear vale ! I linger yet a moment,
Thinking of the hours now flown away ;
Thinking, too, of how the distant future
Once looked fairer than the past to-day:
Then this hill-side seemed a lofty moun-
tain

Region of unclouded blessedness ;
Now I turn and gaze about my footpath,
Sighing at its barren dreariness.

II.—THE PRESENT.

Barren ! Do not all these graceful fern fronds,
All this wealth of purple heather-bloom,
All these milk-white cups of grass Par-nassus,
Mock the word, and chase away my gloom ?
Shall I miss, in vain regrets, the treasures
Thickly strewn about my upward way ;
As I erewhile missed, in fleeting visions,
Half the sweets that in the valley lay ?

Surely no. My spirit rises blithely
As I pluck each smallest wayside flower ;
Feast my eyes upon its painted petal ;
Seize the passing pleasures of the hour ;
Breathe the wholesome air of these high moorlands,
Tempered by the genial August heat ;
Watch the jewelled dragon-fly flash past me,
And the burnished beetle at my feet.

Catch, too, when with earnest ear I listen,
A low murmur as of distant seas ;
Even feel, in turning some sharp headland,
The strange freshness of the ocean breeze :
Oh, that ocean ! towards the which I travel,
Do I fear or long to reach its shore ;
And to launch upon its unknown waters,
Thence to be my home for evermore ?

Perhaps the fear is greater than the longing ;
Yet if I were told that I must stay
Still upon this mossy tract of upland—
Never reach the waters of the bay ;
Ay, though I had leave to wander backward—
To retrace my path into the dale ;
All the prospect round would seem to narrow ;
All the glowing lights and tints to pale.

So I let the phantom of the future
Keep the present fresh, and bright, and clear ;
And, I climb with firmer will and foot-tread,
Up the hill-side, longing or in fear.
And, my sweeping downs, I learn to love you
Almost better than the sheltered plain ;
Fuller life is yours, and wider vision,
Keener joy, if also keener pain.

III.—THE FUTURE.

Now I stand upon the highest hill-top ;
Strain my eyes to catch a first far view
Of the awful ocean, lying silent
'Neath a canopy of deepest blue ;
For the sun has set, and all the splendour
Of his coloured robes is lost to sight ;
And the sky, though free from cloud or vapour,
Takes the shadows of the gath'ring night.

Through the shadows shall I catch the glimmer
Of the boundless waters far away ?
Must my downward course be dark and cheerless ;
Will no star send out a kindly ray ?
See ! the moon is rising in her glory,
Cold and bright, and oh ! divinely fair,
And her light shines on the sea's smooth surface,
Like an answer to my voiceless prayer.

Ev'ry nearer point she tips with silver,
Beauteous as the sun's broad blaze of gold ;
And the tranquil radiance soothes my spirit—
Wraps it round with soft, caressing fold.
By the friendly light I fear no longer
To descend unto the level shore :
There to wait until I hear the splashing
Of my magic bark's advancing oar.

For the future now lies calm before me—
Calm and solemn, far as eye can reach ;
And the snow-clad moors slope gently downward,
Till they touch the shingles on the beach.
On the beach the glitt'ring wavelets ripple,
With a voice of low monotony ;
And they whisper secrets of the ocean—
Seem to bound the dread Infinity !

Stay, descending steps ! the shadows deepen :
Earth is hid ; I only see the light
Resting on the farthest ridge of waters,
In a mystic sheet of dazzling white.
Hark ! is it the wind among the brambles ;
Or the surf which breaks upon the shore ?
Courage, fainting heart ! I know the token ;
'Tis the dip of an advancing oar.

EMMA RHODES.

THE OTHER EAR-RING.

"AND if I could make sure that you two boys would behave yourselves and give me no trouble, perhaps I might take you this year, just for a treat."

"Behave ourselves!" exclaimed Tod, indignantly resentful. "Do you take us for two children, sir?"

"We would be as good as gold, sir," I added, turning eagerly to the Squire.

"Well, Johnny, I'm not much afraid but that you would. Perhaps I'll trust you both, then, Joe."

"Thank you, father."

"I shall see," added the Pater, thinking it well to put in a little qualification. "It's not quite a promise, mind. But it is two or three years now, I think, since you went to them."

"It seems like six," said Tod. "I know it's four."

We were talking of Worcester Races. At that period they used to take place early in August. Dr. Frost had an unpleasant habit of reassembling his pupils either the same week or the previous one; and to get over to the races was nearly as difficult for Tod and for me as though they had been run in California. To hear the Pater say he might perhaps take us this year, just as the Midsummer holidays were drawing to an end, and say it voluntarily, was as good as it was unexpected. He meant it, too; in spite of the added reservation: and Dr. Frost was warned that he need not expect us until the race week was at its close.

The Squire drove into Worcester on the Monday, to be ready for the races on Tuesday morning, with Tod, myself, and the groom—Giles; and put up, as usual, at the Star-and-Garter. Sometimes he only drove in and back on each of the three race days; or perhaps on two of them: this he could do very well from Crabb Cot, but it was a good pull for the horses from Dyke Manor. This year, to our intense gratification, he meant to stay in the town.

The Faithful City was already in a bustle. It had put on its best appearance, and had its windows cleaned: some of the shop-fronts were being polished off as we drove slowly up the streets. Families were, like ourselves, coming in: more would come before night. The theatre was open, and we went to it after dinner; and saw, I remember, Guy Mannering (over which the Pater went to sleep), and an after-piece with a ghost in it.

The next morning I took the nearest way from the hotel to Sansome

Walk, and went up it to call on one of our fellows who lived near the top. His friends always let him stay at home for the race week. A servant-maid came running to answer my knock at the door.

"Is Harry Parker at home?"

"No, sir," answered the girl; who seemed to be cleaning up for the races on her own account, for her face and arms were all coaly. "Master Harry have gone down to Pitchcroft, I think."

"I hope he has gone early enough!" said I, feeling disappointed. "Why, the races won't begin for hours yet."

"Well, sir," she said, "I suppose there's a deal more life to be seen there than here, though it is early in the day."

That might easily be. For of all solitary places Sansome Walk was, in those days, the dreariest, especially portions of it. What with the overhanging horse-chestnut trees, and the high dead wall behind those on the one hand, and the flat stretch of lonely fields on the other, Sansome Walk was what Harry Parker used to call a caution. You might pass through all its long length from end to end and never meet a soul.

Taking that narrow by-way on my way back that leads into the Tything by St. Oswald's Chapel, and whistling a bar of the sweet song I had heard at the theatre overnight, "There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream," somebody came swiftly advancing down the same narrow path, and I prepared to back sideways to let her pass, —a young woman with a large shabby shawl on, and the remains of faded gentility about her.

It was Lucy Bird! As she drew near, lifting her sad sweet eyes to mine with a mournful smile, my heart gave a great throb of pity. Faded, worn, anxious, reduced!—oh, how unlike she was, poor girl, to the once gay and charming Lucy Ashton!

"Why, Lucy! I did not expect to see you in Worcester! We heard you had left it months ago."

"Yes, we left last February for London," she answered. "Captain Bird has only come down for the races."

As she took her hand from underneath her shawl to respond to mine, I saw that she was carrying some cheese and a paper of cold cooked meat. She must have been buying the meat at the cook's shop, as the Worcester people called it, which was in the middle of High Street. Oh! what a change, what a change for the delicately-bred Lucy Ashton! Better that her Master of Ravenswood had buried his horse and himself in the flooded land, as the other one did, than have brought her to this.

"Where are you going to, down this dismal place, Lucy?"

"Home," she answered. "We have taken lodgings at the top of Sansome Walk."

"At one of those cottages a little beyond it?"

"Yes, at one of those. How are you all, Johnny? How is Mrs. Todhetley?"

"Oh, she's blooming."

"Is she at Worcester?"

"No, at Dyke Manor. She would not come. The Squire drove us in yesterday. We are at the Star."

"Ah! yes," she said, her eyes taking a dreamy, far-off look. "I remember staying at the Star myself one race week. Papa brought me. It was the year I left school."

How things were altered with her! Carrying home papers of cheese and cooked meat!

"Have you heard or seen anything of my brothers lately, Johnny Ludlow?"

"Not since we were last staying at Crabb Cot. We went to Timberdale Church one day and heard your brother Charles preach; and we dined once with Robert at the Court, and he and his wife came once to dine with us. But—have you not seen your brother James?"

"No—and I would rather not see him. He would be sure to ask me painful questions."

"But he is always about the streets here, seeing after his patients, Lucy. I wonder you have not met."

"We only came down last Saturday: and I go out as little as I can," she said, a kind of evasiveness—or rather, perhaps, hesitation—in her tone and manner that struck me. I did think I saw James's carriage before me just now as I came up the Tything. It turned into Britannia Square."

"I daresay. We met it yesterday in Sidbury as we drove in."

"His practice gets large, I suppose. You say Charles was preaching at Timberdale?" she added: "was Herbert Tanerton ill?"

"Yes. Ailing, that is. Your brother came over to take the duty for him. Will you call at the Star and see the Squire, Lucy? You know how pleased he would be."

"N—o," she answered, her manner still more hesitating, just as though she were in a peck of inward doubt; and she seemed to be debating some matter mentally. "I—I would have come after dark, had Mrs. Todhetley been there. At least I think I would—I don't know."

"You can come all the same, Lucy."

"But no—that would not have done," she went on to herself, in a half whisper. "I might have been seen. It would never have done to risk it. The truth is, Johnny, I ought to see Mrs. Todhetley on a matter of business. Though even if she were here, I do not know that I might dare to see her. It is—not exactly my own business—and—and mischief might come of it."

"Is it anything I can say to her for you?"

"I—think—you might," she returned slowly, pausing, as before, between her words. "I know you are to be trusted, Johnny."

"That I am. I'd not forget a single item of the message."

"I did not mean in that way. I shall have to entrust to you a private matter; a disagreeable secret. It is a long, long while that I have wanted to tell some of you; ever since last winter: and yet, now that the opportunity has come that I may do it, I scarcely dare. The Squire is hasty and impulsive, his son is proud; but I think I may confide in you, Johnny."

"Only try me, Lucy."

"Well, I will. *I will.* I know you are true as steel. Not this morning, for I cannot stop—and I am not prepared. Let me see Where shall we meet again? No, no, Johnny, I cannot venture to the hotel: it is of no use to suggest that."

"Shall I come to your lodgings?"

She just shook her head by way of dissent, and remained in silent thought. I could not imagine what it was she had to tell me that required all this preparation: but it came into my mind to be glad that I had chanced to go that morning to Harry Parker's.

"Suppose you meet me in Sansome Walk this afternoon, Johnny Ludlow? Say at"—considering—"yes, at four o'clock. That will be a safe hour, for they will be on the racecourse and out of the way. People will, I mean," she added, hastily: but somehow I did not think she had meant people. "Can you come?"

"I will manage it."

"And, if you don't meet me at that time—it is just possible that I may be prevented coming out—I will be there at eight o'clock this evening instead," she continued. "That I know I can do."

"Very well. I'll be sure to be there."

Hardly waiting another minute to say good morning, she went swiftly on. I began wondering what excuse I could make for leaving the Squire's carriage in the midst of the sport, and whether he would let me leave it.

"But the way for that was paved without any effort of mine. At the early lunch, the Squire, in the openness of his heart, offered a seat in the phaeton to some old acquaintance from Martley. Which of course would involve Tod's sitting behind with me, and Giles's being left out altogether.

"Catch me at it!" cried Tod. "You can do as you please, Johnny: I shall walk."

"I will walk too," I said—though you of course understand that I had never expected to sit elsewhere than behind. And I knew it would be easier for me to lose Tod in the crowd, and so get away to keep the appointment, than it would have been to elude the Squire's questioning as to why I could want to get out of the carriage.

Lunch over, Tod said he would go to the Bell, to see whether the Letsoms had come in ; and we started off. No ; the waiter had seen nothing of them. Onwards, down Broad Street we went, took the Quai, and so got on that way to Pitchcroft—as the racecourse is called. The booths and shows were at this end, and the chief part of the crowd. Before us lay stretched the long expanse of the course, green and level as a bowling-green. The grand-stand (comparatively speaking a new erection there) lay on the left, higher up, the winning-chair and distance-post facing it. Behind the stand, flanking all that side of Pitchcroft, the beautiful river Severn flowed along between its green banks, the houses of Henwick opposite looking down upon it from their great height, over their sloping gardens. It was a hot day, the blue sky dark and cloudless.

"True and correct card of all the running horses, gentlemen : the names, weights, and colours o' the riders!" The shouted-out words, echoing on all sides from the men who held these cards for sale, are repeated in my brain now ; as are other sounds and sights. I was somewhat older then than I had been ; but it was not so very long since those shows, ranged around there side by side, a long line of them, held the greatest attraction for me in life. Guy Mannering, the past night, had been very nice to see, very enjoyable ; but it possessed not the nameless charm of that first "play" I went to in Scowton's Show on the racecourse. *That* charm could never come again. And I was but a lad yet.

The lightning with which the play opened was real lightning to me ; the thunder real thunder. The gentleman who stood, when the curtain rose, gorgeously attired in a scarlet doublet, slashed with gold (something between a king and a bandit), with uplifted face of terror and drawn sword, calling the war of the elements "tremendious," was to me a greater potentate than nearly the world could contain ! The young lady, his daughter, in ringlets and spangles, who came flying on in the midst of it, and fell at his feet with upraised arms and a piteous appeal, "Alas ! my father, and will you not consent to my marriage with Alphonso ?" seemed more lovely to me than the Sultanas in the Arabian Nights, or the Princesses in Fairyland. I sat there entranced and speechless. A new world had opened to me—a world of delight. For weeks and weeks afterwards, that play, with its wondrous beauties, its shifting scenes, was present to me sleeping and waking.

The ladies in spangles, the gentlemen in slashed doublets, were on the platforms of their respective shows to-day, dancing for the benefit of Pitchcroft. Now and again a set would leave off, the music ceasing also, to announce that the performance was about to commence. I am not sure but I should have gone up to see one, but for the presence of Tod and Harry Parker—whom we had met on the course. There were learned pigs, and spotted calves, and striped zebras ; and ginger-

bread and cake stalls ; and boat-swings and merry-go-rounds—which had made me frightfully sick once when Hannah let me go in one. And there was the ever-increasing throng, augmenting incessantly ; carriages, horsemen, shoals of foot passengers ; conjurers and fortunetellers ; small tables for the game of “thimble-rig,” their owners looking out very sharply for the constables who might chance to be looking for them ; and the movable exhibitions of dancing dolls and Punch and Judy. Ay, the sounds and the sights are in my brain now. The bands of the different shows, mostly attired in scarlet and gold, all blowing and drumming as hard as they could drum and blow ; the shouted-out invitations to the admiring spectators, “Walk up, ladies and gentlemen, the performance is just a-going to begin ;” the scraping of the blind fiddlers ; the screeching of the ballad singers ; the sudden uproar as a stray dog, seen crossing the course, is hunted off ; the incessant jabber and the Babel of tongues ; and the soft roll of wheels on the turf.

Hark ! The bell rings for the clearing of the course. People know what it means, and those who are cautious hasten at once to escape under the cords on either side.. The gallop of a horse is heard, its rider, in his red coat and white smalls, loudly smacking his whip to clear it. The first race is about to begin. All the world presses towards the environs of the grand-stand to get a sight of the several horses entered for it. Here they come ; the jockeys in their distinguishing colours, trying their horses in a brisk canter, after having been weighed in the paddock. A few minutes, and the start is effected : they are off !

It is only a two-mile heat. The carriages are all drawn up against the cords ; the foot-passengers press it ; horsemen get where they can. And now the excitement is at its height ; the rush of the racers coming in to the winning-post breaks on the ear. They fly like the-wind.

At that moment I caught sight of the sharply-eager face of a good-looking, dashing man, got up to perfection : you might have taken him for a lord, at least. Arm-in-arm with him stood another, well-got-up also, as a sporting country gentleman : he wore a green cut-away coat, top-boots, and a broad-brimmed hat which shaded his face. If I say “got up,” it is because I knew the one, and I fancied I did the other. But the latter’s face was partly turned from me, and hidden, as I have said, by the hat. Both watched the swiftly-coming race-horses with ill-concealed anxiety : and both, as well-got-up gentlemen at ease, strove to appear indifferent.

“Tod, there’s Captain Bird.”

“Captain Bird ! Where ! You are always fancying things, Johnny.”

“A few yards lower down. Close to the cords.”

“Oh, be shot to the scoundrel, and so it is ! What a swell ! Don’t bother. Here they come.”

"Blue cap wins!" "No; red sleeves gains on him!" "Yellow stripes is first!" "Pink jacket has it!" "By Jove! the bay colt is distanced!" "Purple wins by a neck!"

With the hubbub of these called-out different versions from the bystanders echoing on our ears, the horses flew past in a rush and a whirl. Black cap and white jacket was the winner.

Amid the crowding and the pushing and the excitement that ensued, I tried to get nearer to Captain Bird. Not to see *him*: it was impossible to look at him with any patience, and contrast his dashing appearance with that of poor, faded Lucy's: but to see the other man. For he put me in mind of the gentleman-detective, Eccles, who had loomed upon us at Crab Cot that Sunday afternoon in the past winter, polished off the surloin of beef, crammed the Squire with anecdotes of his college life, and finally made off with the other ear-ring.

If you read the paper called Mrs. Todhetley's Ear-rings, the circumstances may easily be recalled. She lost an ear-ring out of her ear: a beautiful ear-ring of pink topaz encircled with diamonds. It was supposed a tramp had picked it up; and the Squire went about it to the police at Worcester. On the following Sunday a gentleman called introducing himself as Mr. Eccles, a private detective connected with the said police, from whom he purported to come. The Squire was marvellously taken with him, ordered in the beef, not long gone out from the dinner, and was eager to entrust the ear-ring to him (which he asked to be allowed to borrow for the purpose of comparing it with the lost one, to which he said a clue had been obtained), as he was to take it. That Eccles had been a gentleman once—at least, that he had mixed with gentlemen, was easy to be seen: and perhaps had also been an Oxford man, as he asserted; but he was certainly a swindler now. He carried off the ear-ring; and we had never seen him, or it, from that day to this. But I did think I saw him now on the racecourse. In the side face, and the tall, well-shaped figure of the top-booted country gentlemen with the heavy bunch of seals hanging to his watch-chain, who leaned on that man Captain Bird's arm, there was a great resemblance to him. The other ear-ring, lost first, was found in the garden under a small fir-tree when the snow melted away; where it must have dropped unseen from Mrs. Todhetley's ear, as she stopped in the path to shake the snow from the tree.

But the rush of people, sweeping by, was too great. Captain Bird and he were nowhere to be seen. In the confusion also I lost Tod and Harry Parker. The country gentleman I meant to find if I could, and went about looking for him.

The carriages were coming away from their standing places near the ropes to drive about the course, as was the custom in those days. Such a thing as taking the horses out of a carriage and letting it stay where it was until the end of the day, was not known on Worcester racecourse.

You might count the carriages-and-four there then, their inmates exchanging greetings with each other in passing, as they drove to and fro. It was a sight to see the noblemen's turn-outs; the glittering harness, the array of servants in their sumptuous liveries; for they came in style to the races. The meeting on the course was the chief local event of the year, when all the county assembled to see each other and look their best.

"Will you get up now, Johnny?"

The soft bowling of the Squire's carriage-wheels arrested itself, as he drew up to speak to me. The Martley old gentleman sat with him, and there was a vacant place by Giles behind.

"No thank you, sir. I would rather be on foot."

"As you will, lad. Is your watch safe?"

"Oh, yes."

"Where's Joe?"

"Somewhere about. He is with Harry Parker. I have only just missed them."

"Missed them! Oh, and I suppose you are looking for them. A capital race, that last."

"Yes, sir."

"Mind you take care of yourself, Johnny," he called back, as he touched up Bob and Blister, to drive on. I generally did take care of myself, but the Squire never forgot to remind me to do it.

The afternoon went on, and my search with it in the intervals of the racing. I could see nothing of those I wanted to see, or of Tod and Harry Parker. Our meeting, or not meeting, was just a chance, amid those crowds and crowds of human beings, constantly moving. Three o'clock had struck; and as soon as the next race should be over—a four-mile heat—it would be nearly time to think about keeping my appointment with Lucy Bird.

And now once more set in all the excitement of the running. A good field started for the four mile heat, more horses than had run yet.

I liked those four-mile heats on Worcester racecourse: when we watched the jockeys in their gay and varied colours describing the figure of eight, and coming in, hot and panting, at the end. The favourites this time were two horses named "Swallower and "Master Ben." Each horse was well liked: and some betters backed one, some the other. Now they are off!

The running began, slow and steady; the two favourites just ahead; a black horse (I forgot his name, but his jockey wore crimson and purple) hanging on to them; most of the other horses lying outside. The two kept together all the way, and as they came in for the final run the excitement was intense.

"Swallower has it by a neck!" "No, Master Ben heads him!"

"Ben wins; Swallower loses!" "Swallower has it; Ben's jockey is

dead beat!" and so on, and so on. Amid the shouts and the commotion the result was announced—a dead heat.

So the race must be run again. I looked at my watch (which you may be sure I had kept carefully buttoned up under my jacket), wondering whether I could stay for it. That was uncertain; there was no knowing how long an interval would be allowed for breathing-time.

Suddenly there arose a frightful commotion above all the natural commotion of the course. People rushed towards one point; horsemen galloped thither, carriages bowled cautiously in their wake. The centre of attraction appeared to be on the banks of the river, just beyond the grand-stand. What was it? What had occurred? The yells were deafening; the pushing fearful. At last the cause was known: King Mob was ducking some offender in the Severn.

To get near, so as to see anything of the fun, was impossible: it was equally impossible to gather what he had done; whether picked a pocket, or cheated at betting. Those are the two offences that on Pitchcroft were then deemed deserving of the water. This time, I think, it was connected with betting.

Soon the yells became louder and nearer. Execrations filled the air. The crowd opened, and a wretched looking individual emerged out of it on the hard run, his clothes dripping water, his lank hair hanging about his face like the slim tails of so many rats.

On he came, the mob shouting and hallooing in his wake, and brushed close past me. Why! it was surely the country gentleman I had seen with Bird! I knew him again at once. But whether it was the man Eccles or not, I did not see: he tore by swiftly, his head kept down. A broad-brimmed hat came flying after him, propelled by the feet of the crowd. He stooped to catch it up, and then kept on his way right across the course, no doubt to make his escape from it. Yes, it was the same man in his top-boots. I was sure of that. Scampering close to his heels, fretting and yelling furiously, was a half-starved white dog with a tin kettle tied to his tail. I wondered which of the two was the more frightened—the dog or the man.

And standing very nearly close to me, as I saw then, Captain was Bird. Not running, not shouting; simply looking on with a countenance of supreme indifference, that seemed to express no end of languid contempt of the fun. Not a sign of recognition crossed his face as the half-drowned wight swept past him: nobody could have supposed he ever set eyes on him before. And when the surging crowd had passed, he sauntered away in the direction of the saddling-place.

But I lost the race. Though I stayed a little late, hoping to at last see the horses come out for the second start, and how many of the former field would compete for it, the minutes flew all too swiftly by, and I had to go, and to put the steam on. Making a bolt across Pitchcroft and up Salt Lane, went I, full split, over the Tything slantwise,

and so down to Sansome Walk. St. Oswald's clock was tinkling out four as I reached it.

Lucy did not come. She had indicated the spot where the meeting should be ; and I waited there, making the best I could of it ; cooling myself, and looking out for her. At half-past four I gave her up in my own mind ; and when five o'clock struck, I knew it was useless to stay longer. So I began to take my way back slower than I had come ; and on turning out by St. Oswald's, I saw the carriages and people flocking up on their way from Pitchcroft. The day's racing was over.

There was a crowd at the top of Salt Lane, and I had to wait before I could get across. In the wake of a carriage-and-four that was turning out of it, came Captain Bird, not a feather of his plumage ruffled, not a speck (save dust) on his superfine coat, not a wristband soiled. He had not been ducked, if his friend had.

"How d'ye do, Master Ludlow?" said he, with a grandly patronising air, and a flourish of his cane, as if it were a condescension to notice me. And I answered him civilly ; though he must have been aware I knew what a scamp he was.

"I wish he'd steal away to America some moonlight night," ran my thoughts, "and leave poor Lucy in peace."

The Squire's carriage dashed up to the hotel as I reached it, Tod sitting behind with Giles. I asked which of the two horses had won. Swallower : won by half a neck. The Squire was in a glow of satisfaction, boasting of the well-contested race.

And now, to make things intelligible, I must refer again for a minute or two to that past paper. It may be remembered that when "Detective Eccles" called on us that Sunday afternoon, asking to look at the fellow ear-ring to the one lost, Mrs. Todhetley had gone in to the Coneys', and the Squire sent me for her. When I got there, Lucy Bird was in the drawing-room alone, the Mater being upstairs with Mrs. Coney. Poor Lucy told me she had been spending a day or two at Timberdale Court (her happy childhood's home), and had come over to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Coney, who were always kind to her, she added with a sobbing sigh ; but she was going back to Worcester by the next train. I told her what I had come for—the detective's visit and his request to see the other ear-ring. Mrs. Todhetley felt nervous at meeting a real live detective, and asked me no end of questions as to what this particular one was like. I said he was no tiger to be afraid of, and described him as well as I could : a tall, slender, gentlemanly man, well-dressed ; gold studs, a ring on his finger, a blue necktie, and a black moustache. Lucy (I had noticed it at the time) seemed struck with the description ; but she made no remark. Before we turned in at our gate we saw her leave the Coneys' house, and come stepping through the snow on her way to the station. Since then, until now we had not seen anything of Lucy Bird.

The stars flickered through the trees in Sansome Walk as I turned into it. A fine trouble I had had to come! Some entertainment was in full fling that evening at the Saracen's Head—a kind of circus, combined with rope-dancing. Worcester would be filled with shows during the race week (I don't mean those on Pitchcroft), and we went to as many as we could get money for. We had made the bargain with Harry Parker on the course to go to this one and during the crowded dinner Tod asked the Squire's leave. He gave it with the usual injunction to take care of ourselves, and on condition that we left our watches at home. So, there I was, in a fix; neither daring to say I could not go, nor daring to say what prevented it, for Lucy had bound me to secrecy.

"What time is this thing going to be over to night, Joe?" had questioned the Squire, who was drinking port wine with some more old gentlemen at one end of the table, as we rose to go.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Tod. "About ten o'clock, I dare say."

"Well, mind you come straight home, you two. I won't have you getting into mischief. Do you hear, Johnny?"

"What mischief do you suppose, sir, we are likely to get into?" fired Tod.

"I don't know," answered the Squire. "When I was a young lad— younger than you—staying here at the races with my father, I remember we were so wicked one night as to go about ringing and knocking at all the doors ——"

"You and your father, sir?" asked Tod, innocently.

"My father! no!" roared the Squire. "What do you mean, Joe? How dare you? My father go about the town knocking at doors and ringing at bells! How dare you suggest such an idea? We left my father, sir, at the hotel with his friends at their wine, as you are leaving me with my friends here. It was I and half-a-dozen other young rascals who did it—more shame for us. I can't be sure how many bell-wires we broke. The world has grown wiser since then, though I don't think it's better; and—and mind you walk quietly home. Don't get into a fight, or quarrel, or anything of that kind. The streets are sure to be full of rough people and pickpockets."

Harry Parker was waiting for us in the hotel gateway. He said he feared we should be late, and thought we must have been eating dinner for a week by the time we took over it.

"I'm not coming with you, Tod," I said; "I'll join you presently."

"Tod turned round and faced me. "What on earth's that for, Johnny?"

"Oh, nothing. I'll come soon. You two go on."

"Suppose you don't get a place!" cried Parker to me.

"Oh, I shall get one fast enough: it won't be so crowded as all that."

"Now look here, lad," said Tod, with his face of resolution, "you are up to some dodge. What is it?"

"My head aches badly," I said—and that was true. "I can't go into that hot place until I have had a spell of fresh air. But I will be sure to join you later, if I can."

My headaches were always allowed. I had them rather often. Not the splitting, roaring pain that Tod would get in his head on rare occasions, once a twelvemonth, or so, when anything greatly worried him; but bad enough in all conscience. He said no more; and set off with Harry Parker up the street towards the Saracen's Head.

The stars were flickering through the trees in Sansome Walk, looking as bright as they do on a frosty night in winter. It was cool and pleasant: the great heat of the day—which must have given me my headache—had passed. Mrs. Bird was already at the spot. She drew me underneath the trees on the side, looking up the walk as though she feared she had been followed. A burst of distant music crashed out and was borne towards us on the air: the circus band, at the Saracen's Head. Lucy still glanced back the way she had come.

"Are you afraid of anything, Lucy?"

"There is no danger, I believe," she answered; "but I cannot help being timid: for, if it were known what I am doing, I—I—I don't know what they would do to me."

"You did not come this afternoon."

"No. I was very sorry, but I could not," she said, as we paced slowly about, side by side. "I had my shawl and bonnet on to come, when Edwards came in—a friend of my husband's, who is staying with him. He had somehow got into the Severn, and looked quite an object, his hair and clothes dripping wet, and his forehead bruised."

"Why, Lucy, he was ducked!" I cried excitedly. "I saw it all. That is, I saw the row; and I saw him when he made his escape across Pitchcroft. He had on a smart green cut-away coat, and top-boots."

"Yes, yes," she said; "I was sure it was something of that kind. When my husband came home later they were talking together in an undertone, Edwards cursing some betting-man, and Captain Bird telling Edwards that it was his own fault for not being more cautious. However, I could not come out, Johnny, though I knew you were waiting for me. Edwards asked, as impertinently as he dared, where I was off to. To buy some tea, I answered, but that it did not matter particularly, as I had enough for the evening. They think I have come out to buy it now."

"Do you mean to say, Lucy, that Captain Bird denies you free liberty?—watches you as a cat does a mouse?"

"No, no; you must not take up wrong notions of my husband, Johnny"

Ludlow. Bad though the estimation in which he is held by most people is, he has never been really unkind to me. Trouble, frightful trouble he does bring upon me, for I am his wife and have to share it, but personally unkind to me he has never yet been."

"Well, I should think it unkind in your place, if I could not go out when I pleased, without being questioned. What do they suspect you would be after?"

"It is not Captain Bird; it is Edwards. As to what he suspects, I am sure he does not know himself; but he seems to be generally suspicious of every one, and he sees I do not like him. I suppose he lives in general fear of being denounced to the police, for he is always doing what he calls 'shady' things; but he must know that he is safe with us. I heard him say to my husband the day before we left London, 'Why do you take your wife down.' Perhaps he thinks my brothers might be coming to call on me, and of course he does not want attention drawn to the place he may chance to be located in, whether here or elsewhere."

"What is his name, Lucy?"

"His name? Edwards."

"It's not Eccles, is it?"

She glanced quickly round at me as we walked, searching my face in the dusk.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because, when I first saw him to-day on the racecourse with Captain Bird, he put me in mind of the fine gentleman who came to us that Sunday at Crabb Cot, calling himself Detective Eccles, and carried off Mrs. Todhetley's other ear-ring."

Mrs. Bird looked straight before her, making no answer.

"*You* must remember that afternoon, Lucy. You were at old Coney's, you know, when I ran over for Mrs. Todhetley; and I told you all about the ear-rings and the detective officer, then making his dinner of half-cold beef at our house while he waited for the Mater to come home and produce the ear-ring. Don't you remember? You were just going back to Worcester."

Still she said not a word.

"Lucy, I think it is the same man. Although his black moustache is gone, I feel sure it is he. The face and the tall slender figure are just like his."

"How singular!" she exclaimed in a low tone to herself. "How strangely things come about!"

"But *is* it Eccles?"

"Johnny Ludlow," she said, catching my arm, and speaking in an excited, breathless whisper, "if you were to bring harm on me—that is, on him or on my husband through me, I should pray to die."

"But you need not be afraid. Goodness me, Lucy! don't you know

that I'd not bring harm on anybody in the world, least of all on you? Why, you said to me this morning that I was true as steel."

"Yes, yes," she said, bursting into tears. "We have always been good friends, have we not, Johnny, since you, a little mite of a child in a tunic and turned-down frill, came to see me one day at school, a nearly grown-up young lady, and wanted to leave me your bright six-pence to buy gingerbread. Oh, Johnny, if all people were but as loyal and true-hearted as you!"

"Then, Lucy, why need you doubt me?"

"Do you not see the shadows of those leaves playing on the ground, cast by the light of that gas-lamp?" she asked. "Just as many shadows, dark as those, lie in the path of my life. They have taught me to fear an enemy where I ought to look for a friend; they have taught me that life is so full of unexpected windings and turnings that we know not one minute what new fear the next may bring forth."

"Well, Lucy, you need not fear me. I have promised you to say nothing of having met you here; and I will say nothing, or of what you tell me."

"Promise it me again, Johnny. Faithfully."

Just a shade of vexation crossed my heart that she should think it needful to reiterate this; but I would not let my face or voice betray it.

"I promise it again, Lucy. Faithfully and truly."

"Ever since last winter I have wanted to hold communication with one of you at your home, and to restore something that had been lost. But it had to be done very, very cautiously, without bringing trouble on me or on anybody connected with me. Many a solitary hour, sitting by myself in our poor lodgings in London, have I deliberated whether I might venture to restore this, and how it was to be done; many a sleepless night has been passed, dwelling on it. Sometimes I thought I would send it anonymously by the post, but it might have been stolen by the way, and I did not dare to register it in my name or address; sometimes it would occur to me to make a parcel of it and despatch it that way. I never did either. I waited until some chance should bring me again near Mrs. Todhetley. But to-day I saw that it would be better to trust you. She is true also, and kind; but she might not be able to keep the secret from the Squire, and he—he would be sure to betray it, though perhaps not intentionally, to all Timberdale, and there's no knowing what mischief might come of it."

Light flashed upon me as she spoke. As surely as though it were already before me in black and white, I knew what she was about to disclose.

"Lucy, it is the lost ear-ring! The man staying with you is Eccles."

"Hush!" she whispered in extreme terror, for a footstep suddenly sounded close to us. Lucy glided behind the trunk of the tree we

were passing ; which in a degree served to hide her. How timid she was !—what cause induced it ?

The intruder was a shop-boy with an apron on, carrying a basket of grocery parcels to one of the few houses higher up. He turned his head and gave us a good stare, probably taking us for a pair of cooing lovers enjoying a stolen ramble by starlight. Setting up a shrill whistle, he passed on.

"I don't know what has come to me lately ; my heart seems to beat at nothing," said poor Mrs. Bird, coming from behind the tree with her hand to her side. "And it was doubly foolish of me to go there; better that had kept quietly walking on with you, Johnny."

"What is it that you are afraid of, Lucy?"

"Only of *their* seeing me ; seeing me with you. Were they to do so, and it were to come out that the ear-ring had been returned, they would know I had done it. They suspected me at the time : at least, Edwards did. For it is the ear-ring I am about to restore to you, Johnny."

She put a little soft white paper packet in my hand, that felt as if it had wool inside it. I hardly knew whether I was awake or asleep. The beautiful ear-ring, that we had given up for good, come back again ! And the sound of the drums and trumpets burst once more upon our ears.

"You will give it to Mrs. Todhetley when you get home, Johnny. And I must leave it to your discretion to tell her what you think proper of whence you obtained it. Somewhat of course you must tell her, but how much or how little I leave with you. Only, take care you bring no harm upon me."

"I am sure, Lucy, that Mrs. Todhetley may be trusted."

"Very well. Both of you must be secret as the grave. For my sake tell her I implore it. Perhaps she will keep the ear-ring by her for a few months, saying nothing, so that this visit of ours into Worcestershire may be quite a thing of the past, and no suspicion, in consequence of it, as connected with the ear-ring, may arise in my husband's mind. After that, when months have elapsed, she must contrive to let it appear that the ear-ring is then, in some plausible way or other, returned to her."

"Rely upon it, we will take care. It will be managed very easily. But how did you get the ear-ring, Lucy?"

"It has been in my possession ever since the night of the day you lost it ; that Sunday afternoon, you know. I have carried it about with me everywhere."

"Do you mean carried it upon you?"

"Yes ; upon me."

"I wonder you never lost it—a little thing like this!" I said, touching the soft packet that lay in my jacket pocket.

"I could not lose it," she whispered. "It was sewn into my clothes."

"But, Lucy, how did you manage to get it?"

She gave me the explanation in a few low, rapid words, glancing about her as she did it. Perhaps I had better repeat it in my own way; and to do that we must go back to the Sunday afternoon. At least, that will render it more intelligible and ship-shape. But I did not learn the one half of the details then: no, nor for a long time afterwards. And so, we go back again in imagination to the time of that January day, when the snow was lying on the ground, and Farmer Coney's good fires were blazing hospitably.

Lucy Bird quitted the warm fires and her kind friends, the Coneys, and followed us out; she saw us turn in at our own gate, and then she picked her way through the snow to the station at South Crabb. It was a long walk for her in that inclement weather; but she had been away from home (if the poor lodgings they then occupied in Worcester could be called home) three days, and was anxious to get back. During her brief absences from it, she was always haunted by the fear of some ill falling on that precious husband of hers, Captain Bird: but he was nothing but an ex-captain, as you know. All the way to the station she was thinking about the ear-rings, and of my description of Detective Eccles. The description was exactly that of her husband's friend, Edwards, both as to person and dress; not that she supposed it could be he. When she left Worcester three days before, Edwards had just arrived. She knew him to be an educated man, of superior manners, and full of anecdote, when he chose, about college life. Like her husband, he had by recklessness and ill conduct sunk lower and lower in the world, until he had to depend on "luck" or "chance" for a living.

Barely had Lucy reached the station, when the train shot in. She took her seat; and after a short halt, the train moved on again. At that moment there strode into the station that self-same man, Edwards, who began shouting furiously for the train to stop, putting up his hands, running, and gesticulating. The train declined to stop; trains generally do decline to stop for late passengers, however frantically adjured; and Edwards was left behind. His appearance astonished Lucy considerably. Had he, in truth, been passing himself off as a detective officer to Squire Todhetley? If so, with what motive? Lucy could not see any inducing motive, and still thought it could not be; that Edwards must be over here on some business of his own. The matter passed from her mind as she drew near Worcester, and reached their lodgings—which were down Lowesmoor way.

Experience had taught Lucy not to ask questions. She was either not answered at all, or the answer would be sure to give her trouble.

Captain Bird had grown tolerably careless as to whether his hazardous doings reached, or did not reach, the ears of his wife, but he did not willingly tell her of them. She said not a word of having seen Edwards, or of what she had heard about the loss of Mrs. Todhetley's ear-ring, or of the detective's visit to Crabb Cot. Lucy's whole life was one of dread and fear, and she never knew whether any remark of hers might not bear upon some dangerous subject. But, while getting the tea, she did just enquire after Edwards.

"Has Edwards left?" she asked carelessly.

"No," replied Captain Bird, who was stretched out before the fire in his slippers, smoking a long pipe, and drinking spirits. He is out on the loose, though, somewhere to day."

It was late at night when Edwards entered. He was in a rage. Trains did not run frequently on Sundays, and he had been kept all that while at South Crabb junction, waiting for one. Lucy went upstairs to bed, leaving Edwards and her husband toping away at brandy and water. Both of them had had quite enough already.

The matter of the ear-rings and the doubt whether Mr. Edwards had been playing at amateur detectiveship would have ended there, but for the accident of Lucy's having to come downstairs again, to get the small travelling bag in which she had carried her combs and brushes. She had put it just inside the little back parlour, where a bed on chairs had been extemporised for Edwards, their lodgings not being very extensive. Lucy was taking up the bag in the dark, when some words in the sitting-room caught her ears; the door between the two rooms being partly open. Before a minute elapsed she had heard too much. Edwards, in a loud, gleeful, boasting tone, was telling how he had been acting the detective, and done the old Squire and his wife out of the other ear-ring. Lucy, looking in through the opening, saw him holding it up; she saw the colours of the long pink topaz drop, and of the diamonds gleaming in the candle-light.

"I thought I could relieve them of it," he said. "When I read that advertisement in the paper, it struck me there might be a field open to do a little stroke of business; and I've done it."

"You are a fool for your pains," growled Captain Bird. "There's sure to be a row."

"The row won't touch me. I'm off to London to-morrow morning, and the ear-ring with me. I wonder what the thing will turn us in? Twenty pounds? There, put it in the box, Bird, and get out the dice."

The dice on a Sunday night!

Lucy felt quite sick as she went back upstairs. What would be the end of all this? Not of this one transaction in particular, but of all the other disgraceful transactions with which her husband was connected? It might come to some public exposure, some criminal trial

at the Bar of Justice ; and of that she had a horrible dread ever haunting her like a nightmare.

She undressed, and went to bed. One hour passed, two hours passed, three hours passed. Lucy turned and turned on her uneasy pillow, feeling fit to die. Besides her own anguish arising from *their* share in it, she was dwelling on the shameful wrong it did their kind friends at Crabb Cot.

The fourth hour was passing. Captain Bird had not come up, and Lucy grew uneasy on that score. Once, when he had taken too much (but as a general rule the ex-captain's delinquencies did not lie in that direction), he had set his shirt sleeve on fire, and burnt his hands badly in putting it out. Slipping out of bed, Lucy put on her slippers and the large old shawl, and crept down to see after him.

Opening the sitting-room door very softly, she looked in. The candles were alight still, but had burnt down nearly to the socket, the dice and some cards were scattered on the table.

Edwards lay at full length on the old red stuff sofa : Captain Bird had thrown himself outside the bed in the other room, the door of which was now wide open, neither of them having undressed. That both were wholly or partially intoxicated, Lucy felt not a doubt of.

Well, she could only leave them as they were. They would come to no harm asleep. Neither would the candles : which must soon burn themselves out. Lucy was about to shut the door again, when her eye fell on the little pasteboard box that contained the ear-ring.

Without a moment's reflection, acting on the spur of impulse, she softly stepped to the table, listed the lid, and took the ear-ring out.

"I will remedy the wrong they have done Mrs. Todhetley," she said to herself. "They will never suspect me."

Up in her room again, she lighted her candle and looked about for some place to conceal the ear-ring, and just as the idea to secure it had come unbidden to her, so did that of a safe place of concealment. With feverish hands she undid a bit of the quilting of her petticoat, one that she had but just made for herself out of an old merino gown, slipped the ear-ring in amid the wadding, and sewed it up again. It could neither be seen nor suspected there ; no, nor even felt, let the skirt be examined as it might. That done, poor Lucy got into bed again and at length fell asleep.

She was awoke by a commotion. It was broad daylight, and her husband (not yet as sober as he might be), was shaking her by the arm. Edwards was standing outside the door, calling out to know whether Mrs. Bird had "got it."

"What is the matter, George?" she cried, starting up in a fright, and for the moment completely forgetting where she was, for she had been aroused from a vivid dream of Timberdale.

"Have you been bringing anything up here from the sitting-room, Lucy?" asked Captain Bird.

"No, nothing," she replied promptly, and he saw that she spoke with truth. For Lucy's recollection had not come to her; she remembered nothing yet about the ear-ring.

"There's something missing," said Captain Bird, speaking thickly. "It has disappeared mysteriously off the sitting-room table. You are sure you have not been down and collared it, Lucy?"

The ear-ring and the theft—her own theft—flashed into her memory together. Oh if she could but avert suspicion from herself! And she strove to call up no end of surprise in her voice.

"Why, how could I have been down, George? Did you not see that I was fast asleep? What have you missed? Some money?"

"Money, no. It was—something of Edwards's. Had it close by him on the table when he went to sleep, he says—he lay on the sofa last night and I had his bed—and this morning it was gone. I thought the house was on fire by the fierce way he came and shook me."

"I'll look for it when I come down, if you tell me what it is," said poor Lucy. "How late I have slept! It must have been the cold journey."

"She has not got it," said Captain Bird, retreating to his friend outside, and closing the door on Lucy. "Knows nothing about it. Was asleep till I awoke her."

"Search the room, you fool," cried the excited Mr. Edwards. "I'd never trust the word of a woman. No offence to your wife, Bird, but they are *not* to be trusted."

"Rubbish!" said Captain Bird.

"Either she or you must have got it. It could not disappear without hands. The people down below have not been to our rooms, as you must know."

"She or I—what do you mean by that?" retorted Captain Bird; and a short sharp quarrel ensued. That the Captain had not touched the ear-ring, Edwards knew full well. It was Edwards who had helped him to reach the bed the previous night: and since then he had been in the deep sleep of stupor. But Edwards did think the Captain's wife had. The result was that Captain Bird re-entered; and, ordering Lucy to lie still, he made as exact a search of the room as his semi-sobered faculties allowed. Lucy watched it from her bed. Amid the general hunting and turning-over of drawers and places, she saw him pick up her gown and petticoats one by one and shake them thoroughly; but he found no signs of the ear-ring.

From that time to this the affair had remained a mystery. There had been no one in the house that night, save the proprietor and his wife, two quiet old people who never concerned themselves with their lodgers. They protested that the street door had been fast, and that no midnight marauder could have broken in and slipped upstairs to steal

a pearl brooch (as Edwards put it) or any other article. So, failing the feasibility of other outlets of suspicion, Edwards continued to suspect Lucy. There were moments when Bird did also : though he trusted her, in regard to it, on the whole. At any rate Lucy was obliged to be most cautious. The quilted skirt had never been off her since, except at night : through the warm genial days of spring and the sultry heat of summer she had worn the clumsy wadded thing continually : and the ear-ring had never been disturbed until this afternoon.

"You see how it is, Johnny," she said to me, with one of her sobbing sighs. But at that same moment the grocer's young man in the white apron came back down the walk, swinging his empty basket by the handle ; and he took another good stare at us in passing.

"I mean, as to the peril I should be in if you suffer the restoration of the ear-ring to transpire," she continued in a whisper, when he was a safe distance. "Oh, Johnny Ludlow ! do you and Mrs. Todhetley take care, for my poor sake !"

"Lucy, you need not doubt either of us," I said earnestly. "We will be, as you phrased it to-day, true as steel—and as cautious. Are you going back ? Let me walk up to the top with you."

"No, no ; we part here. The seeing us together might arouse some suspicion, and there is no absolute certainty that they may not come out, though I don't think they will. Edwards is for ever thinking of that ear-ring : he does not feel safe about it, you perceive. Go you that way : I go this. Farewell, Johnny Ludlow, farewell."

"Good night, Lucy. I am off to the circus now."

She went with a brisk step up the walk. I ran out by St. Oswald's, and so on to the Saracen's head. The place was crammed. I could not get near Tod and Harry Parker ; but they whistled at me across the sawdust and the fancy steeds performing on it.

We sat together in her bedroom at Dyke Manor, the door bolted against intruders. Mrs. Todhetley, in her astonishment at the tale I told, hardly daring to touch the ear-ring. It was Saturday morning ; we had come home from Worcester the previous evening ; and should now be off to school in an hour. Tod had gone strolling out with the Squire ; which gave me my opportunity.

"You see, good mother, how it all is, and the risk we run. Do you know, I had half a mind to keep the ear-ring myself for some months and say never a word to you ; only I was not sure of pitching on a safe hiding-place. It would be so dreadful a thing for Lucy Bird if it were to get known."

"Poor Lucy, poor Lucy !" she said, the tears on her light eyelashes. "Oh, Johnny, if she could but be induced to leave that man !"

"But she can't, you know. Robert Ashton has tried over and over to get her back to the Court—and tried in vain. See how it shines !"

I was holding the ear-ring so that the rays of the sun fell upon it, flashing and sparkling. It seemed more beautiful than it used to be.

"I am very very glad to have it back, Johnny; the other one was useless without it. You have not," with a tone of apprehension in her voice, "told Joseph?"

I shook my head. The truth was, I had never longed to tell any thing so much in my life; for what did I ever conceal from him? It was hard work, I can assure you. The ear-ring burning a hole in my pocket, and I not able to show Tod that it was there!

"And now, mother, where will you put it?"

She rose to unlock a drawer, took from it a small blue box in the shape of a trunk, and unlocked that.

"It is in this that I keep all my little valuables, Johnny. It will be quite safe here. By-and-by we must invent some mode of 'recovering the ear-ring,' as poor Lucy said."

Lifting the lid of a little pasteboard box, she showed me the fellow ear-ring lying in a nest of cotton. I took it out.

"Put them both into your ears for a minute, good mother! Do!"

She smiled, hesitated; then took out the plain rings that were in her ears, and put in the beautiful topaz and diamond ones. Going to the glass to look at herself, she saw the Squire and Tod advancing in the distance. It sent us into a panic. Scuffling the ear-rings out of her ears, she laid them together on the wool in the cardboard box, put the lid on, and folded it round with white paper.

"Light one of the candles on my dressing-table, Johnny. We will seal it up for greater security: there's a bit of red sealing-wax in the tray." And I did so at her direction: stamping it with the seal that had been my father's, and which with his watch they had only recently allowed me to take into wearing.

"There," she said, "should anybody by chance see that packet, though it is not likely, and be curious as to know what it contains, I shall say that I cannot satisfy them, as it concerns Johnny Ludlow."

"Are you upstairs, Johnny? What in the world are you doing there?"

I went leaping down at Tod's call. All was safe now.

That's how the other ear-ring came back. And "Eccles" had to be let off scot free. But I was glad he got the ducking.

JOHNNY LUDLOW.

ON BELLS.

"Therefore I'd have ye not to vapour,
Nor blame ye lads that use ye clapper;
By which are scared ye fiends of hell,
And all by virtue of a bell."

Inscription in Gulval Church.

THREE are more mysteries in a peal of bells than are dreamt of in our philosophy. To the uninitiated, the very names of the different changes are appalling. What will the unlearned say to plain-bob-triples, bob-majors, bob-majors-reversed, double-bob-majors, double bob-royals, and treble-bob-royals?

Now who was Bob? Was there only one eccentric Bob who composed these peals? or a legion of Bobs, or six bell-ringing Bobs, whose friends invented this ingenious method of distinguishing them? We have heard of the three old men of Keswick, all named Tommy Potts, who lived in three houses at the foot of Skiddaw and who, to prevent confusion (?), answered to the appellations of Near Tommy, Middle Tommy, and Far Tommy; but the Bob family—major, minor, double and triple, royal and plain, we have not, so far, had the pleasure of meeting.

But though these Bobs sound sufficiently mysterious, two worse Bobs still remain. These tremendous peals are called grandsire-bob-cators, and bob-maximus. Grandsire-bob consists of seven hundred and twenty changes, rung in one thousand four hundred and forty different ways. Bob-maximus we dare not inquire into at all.

It is almost impossible to imagine the time when bells were not; but such was the benighted state of the old world, that the ancient Greeks and Romans, not to mention the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Antediluvians, celebrated their royal marriages and birthdays, thanksgiving days, and fifths of November, without a single tinkle ringing out from the clouded heights of the tower of Babel, the apex of their pyramids, or the classic heights of their Acropolis. Nothing but a state of heathenism can account for such a want of tuneful taste. Even the Chinese were evidently more civilized, for a pagoda without its bells would be an anomaly not to be imagined, and the celestials no doubt were ringing their joyous carillons when the rest of the barbarians were still without a single peal.

Europe, indeed, was not long to remain in such a blissful state of ignorance, or rather silence, for about A.D. 400, one Paulinus, Bishop of Nosa in Campania, invented, or cast, the first church bells. The ancient Britons, however, having at that far-away time scarcely emerged from

their mud huts and blue paint, were too busy erecting houses and adorning themselves, to profit as they might have done by this wonderful invention ; and it was not till two centuries later on, when, having clothed themselves à-la-mode, amended the error of their ways, and submitted quietly to the barbarians, that the venerable Father Bede chronicles the advent of the first peal of bells.

For many centuries, bell founding, like most other scientific pursuits, was carried on exclusively in the monasteries ; so that these clamorous lively bantlings were bien élevé from their earliest youth ; and, from their first baptism till their final hoisting up, the tone of their morals was rigidly watched and tested. The infant bell, even in a molten state, was subjected to a special consecration. This preliminary ceremony was sufficiently curious : all the brethren in the monastery were ranged in order round the furnace ; the 150th Psalm was sung and certain prayers offered ; the liquid metal was blessed and a petition put up that the saint whose name it was destined to bear would even now take it under his, or her, special protection.

When the bell had safely arrived at man's estate came the christening, a long and important ceremony ; the bells having godfathers and godmothers, like any other right-minded Christians.* This second baptism was performed in church before the whole congregation : two vessels, one containing holy oil and the other holy water, were prepared ; the priest, dipping a linen cloth into the water, washed the bell within and without, the bell being suspended over a larger vessel, that no drop of the holy water might touch the ground. The same ceremony was gone into with the holy oil, the attendant monks meanwhile chanting the 96th, and other psalms ; the bell was then named, after which the whole was repeated five times with various additions of incensing, anointing, ringing, &c. When this six-fold baptism was disposed of ; and for a whole peal it must have been an uncommonly long performance ; the priest explained to the people the reason of the ceremony, which was that the bells might act as preservatives against hail, wind, thunder, lightning, and storms, and above all drive away evil spirits. Truly the office of the old bells could have been no sinecure, so tremendous a task as scaring away the devil depending on the vigilance of their clappers.

Sometimes, with all these edifying precautions, the old bells did not keep their legitimate names. The celebrated Great John at Oxford was christened Mary, in honour of the most Catholic queen. The Vice-chancellor's exclamation on first hearing it ring has been recorded. "Oh ! delicate and sweet harmony ; oh, beautiful Mary, how musically she sounds, how strangely she pleaseth mine ear!"

In spite of all this admiration, Mary refused to retain her name ; probably the deep, sonorous tone was too powerful for a feminine bell ; she assumed the name of John and keeps it, christening notwithstanding.

* Southe.

The inscriptions on bells are sometimes very curious. The oldest are in the Lombardic, or black-letter character; but, as no dates were added till the sixteenth century, it is impossible to tell their ages. The following is a transcript of a black-letter inscription:

"Sum Rosa Pulsata Mundi Raterina Focata."

Another old bell bears the following very similar lines, quoted by Longfellow in the "Golden Legend":

**"Sabbata Pango,
Funera Plango,
Solemnia Clango;"**

of which a free translation is still to be seen on a bell in Durham Cathedral:—

**"To call the folks to church in time—I chime.
When mirth and joy are on the wing—I ring.
When from the body parts the soul—I toll."**

An old writer says, "Fame often makes a great deal of a little. Loud was the lie which that bell told, hanging in a clock-house at Westminster, and usually rung at the coronation and funeral of princes, having this inscription about it:

**"King Edward made me,
Thirty thousand and three; *
Take me down and weigh me,
And more you shall find me."**

But when this bell *was* taken down at the doomsday of abbeys, this and two more were found not to weigh twenty thousand. Many tales of fame are found to shrink accordingly." †

An ambitious little bell at St. Mary's, Devizes, says,

**"I am the first, altho' but small,
I will be heard above you all;"**

And at Aldbourne, on the fourth bell,

**"Humphrey Symsin gave xx pound to buy this bell,
And the parish gave xx more to make this ring go well."**

A delicate insinuation that Humphrey Symsin's bell was cracked.

Gentle reader, were you ever in a belfry when a peal of tuneful bells was ringing? when the chiming melody floated away on the outside breeze, far above the light and murmur of the town, in sweet modulations of rhythmic sound? If so, you will know to your cost that within the effect is not so perfectly harmonious. The liquid golden notes swelling so deliciously on the ear in the open air, are a clamorous jangling and wrangling confusion in the echoing arches of the steeple,

* Namely, pounds.

† Fuller.

and the belfry a very pandemonium of turbulent uproar, from the deep booming bass and shrill tenor bells.

Very strange, weird places are some of those old belfries, dim with the mists and cobwebs of bygone years, full of quaint echoes and fancies that belonged to generations of forgotten people, whose shadows, gravely dark and mysterious, still seem to haunt the place where they once rang many a joyous peal. In the old towers and steeples, up many a step worn by feet that now are silent, past airy arch and narrow loop-hole in the very home of the ancient peals of bells, are to be found many a curious recollection of these dead and gone bell-ringers ; odd jingling rhymes inscribed on the lasting stone, and telling of long-forgotten customs, and long-forgotten people ; curious relics and old personal belongings of these professors of a joyous science whose music is of the far past, but whose memories are even yet present with us.

There were regular codes of laws and customs in use among these old bell-ringers, many of which are still to be found, generally in out-of-the-way country churches and chapels. It is somewhat amusing to find in these codes considerable proof of the mirth and conviviality with which the originators seasoned their tuneful labours ; and the fines, inflicted for various breaches of belfry etiquette, invariably went towards the filling of an immense beer-jug for their refreshment and consolation. Not a few of these famous pitchers are still in existence, they are of considerable size, holding from four to six gallons, and are generally inscribed with a line or two of doggerel rhymes in praise of good beer and good fellowship. At Swansea, the Ringers' Jug bears these two lines :

"Come fill me full with liquor sweet, for that is good when friends do meet ;
When I am full then drink about, I ne'er will fail till all is out."

One of these ancient relics is the Hadleigh jug, a curiosity that has belonged from time immemorial to the Hadleigh bell-ringers. This famous pitcher is of brown earthenware, circular in shape, swelling out in the middle, but contracted at each end, and having two ears. It holds sixteen quarts, and bears this inscription—no doubt the names of the eight ringers—rudely indented, apparently with a chisel, in Roman capitals :

"Me, Thomas Windle, Isaac Bunn, John Mann, Adam Sage, George Bond,
Thomas Goldborough, Robert Smith, Henry West."

Below the names,—

"If you love me doe not lend me,
Euse me often, and keep me cleynly,
Fill me full, or not at all,
If it be strong, and not with small."

This benevolently-disposed pitcher is still used on extraordinary occasions, and is filled every Christmas by mine host of the "Eight

Bells Inn" with strong beer, which goes by the name of "King William." Any stranger going in is expected to pay sixpence to assist in replenishing this capacious measure.

A still older jug is in the Norwich Museum. It is dated 1676, has but one handle, and is curiously ornamented. The inscription is,

"John Wayman,
J. F.

Come, brother, shall we join?
Give me your twopence—here is mine."

At one time, about the seventeenth century, campanology was a gentleman's recreation, and a particularly laborious one it must have been, for very hard work it is that goes on up in the belfry. An amount of physical force and scientific skill is required in the management of a bell-rope that ought to be respectfully spoken of. Ben Jonson says, "If the bells have any sides, the clapper will find 'em :" but a long pull and a strong pull is necessary to beguile a single tinkle from either bell or clapper ; and to ring in perfect time and tune is an accomplishment so difficult of attainment, that months of daily practice are necessary to produce even a respectable amount of excellence. Those knights and squires of auld lang syne must have been made of stern stuff when they took to bell-ringing as a mere amusement ; but that this is an undoubted fact is attested by the old inscriptions in belfries, which repeatedly mention their bells as being rung by gentlemen, and this at a time when the term was not quite so indiscriminately applied as at present. At the church of Chapel-en-le-Frith, near Manchester, is a complete set of rules, especially agreed upon by these gentlemanly ringers for their own use. They are too long for insertion entire, but the most striking are as follows,—

" Gentlemen that here intend to ring,
See these laws you keep in everything;
First, when you to the bell-house here do come,
See that the ringers have convenient room;
Next, if you do intend here for to ring,
With hat or spur on, do not touch a string;
If you a bell throw over, without delay,
Eightpence to the clerk you then must pay.
* * * * *

For every oath here sworn, ere you go hence,
Unto the poor you then must pay twelve pence.
* * * * *

And whoso doth these orders disobey,
Unto the stocks he shall be brought straightway,
And there remain until that he be willing
To pay his forfeit and the clerk a shilling."

The special notice against hats and spurs is curious. Probably the hats were of the gorgeous type—feathered, and looped with jewels—

common to the Cavaliers. At St. Peter's Church, Shaftesbury, is an inscription in which the objection extends to the belt as well—

“In your ringing make no demur,
Pull off your hat, your belt, and spur.”

At Tong Church, in Shropshire, date 1694, a penalty is exacted for the benefit of thirsty souls—

“If that you ring with spur or hat,
A jugg of beer must pay for that.”

These gentlemanly bellringers seem to have indulged in a considerable amount of strong language; in almost every inscription there is a caution against the use thereof and a punishment or fine inflicted. At the Parish Church of Andover is—

“But if that you do swear or curse,
Twelve pence is due, pull out your purse.”

At Calstock Church, Cornwall, those who were in the habit of letting their angry passions rise, were cautioned particularly strongly—

“Who swears or curse, or in a choleric mood
Quarrels or strike, altho' he draw no blood,
Let him pay Sixpence for each single crime,
'Twill make him cautious 'gainst another time.”

Whether these doughty champions of bell-ringing submitted to the fines and punishment with due humility, history sayeth not. The confinement of the “stocks” would—according to our views—be so obnoxious that it is difficult to imagine anyone submitting to it, excepting, like Signor Riccabocca, “to try what it was like.”

The number of changes that can be rung on a peal of bells is almost incredible. It would take ninety-one years to ring the changes upon twelve bells at the rate of two strokes to a second; the changes upon fourteen could not be rung through at the same rate in less than 16,575 years; and upon four-and-twenty they would require more than 117,000 billions of years.*

In 1796 the Westmoreland youths rang a complete course of 5,040 peals—called by the mysterious name of gransire triples—in three hours and twenty minutes. This was considered a gigantic performance, but it was fairly eclipsed by the men of Kidderminster, who rang the changes in three hours and fourteen minutes—a feat which seems incredible, comprising as it does 1,267,453 separate strokes or rings. Truly there were giants in the land in those days.

But the bell-ringing of England, however scientifically and powerfully performed, is a mere meaningless jingle, compared to the beautiful carillons of the Continent; indeed, the art as practised in England

* Southeley.

belongs peculiarly to us, the Continental bells being almost universally played by keys.

At Amsterdam, about the year 1600, was born one Franz Hemony, who may safely be styled the very king of bell-founding, since he it was who wrought the colossal peals of Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, Utrecht, &c. His name is frequently found inscribed on the Holland bells. These bells are gigantic musical notes. At Utrecht there are forty-two; at Antwerp over one hundred; the general number is from thirty to sixty, but in the Tower of Les Halles at Bruges is the finest carillon in the Low Countries—perhaps, in the world. It was on these bells “low and loud, and sweetly blended,” that Longfellow wrote his carillon, as he lay

“In Bruges, at the Fleur de Blé,
Listening with a wild delight
To the chimes that through the night
Rang their changes from the belfry
Of that quaint old Flemish city.”

Hemony arranged his bells in tiers. Six or eight of the largest bass bells were hung on the first floor of the belfry, perhaps 150 feet up the tower; higher still, among many an airy arch and solid buttress, hung ten or twelve smaller ones; highest of all, far away, a dim dizzy height, hung twenty or thirty more. These stupendous peals are sounded by means of a cylinder, on the principle of a barrel-organ, or played by keys by a musician. Every tone and semi-tone are represented, and the most delicate harmony, the grandest chorales, and most intricate figures can be executed on these bells. But what a giant in conception and power must be the musician who presides over this colossal harmony; what a sense of unlimited command over the power of sound as he thunders out sonorous grand chords, stately solemn melodies, gentle cadences of ringing mirth, or soft floating phrases like a dream of silver bells; what a sense of supreme sway, as the grand music rolls over the country for miles and miles, filling the air with its wonderful grandeur and beauty, and causing the heart to swell with emotion at the unutterable splendour of the music which seems to float up to heaven and die among the stars!

We have no carillons to compare with this in England. There is a small one at St. Giles' Church, Edinburgh, and it is said that one is to be placed in St. Paul's; whether the present generation of Londoners will ever hear this bell-music float over their grim dusky town, is an open question.

The bell-ringers at the church of St. Margaret, Dunham Massey, make a very successful attempt at a connected melody on Christmas Day. Instead of the ordinary peal, the ringers chime the old Christmas hymn, “Christians, awake.” The effect is very charming, though, owing to the want of several semitones, the air is not quite perfect.

To any one hearing it for the first time, the peculiar dropping-from-above sound of this chimed hymn is very fascinating.

We are told there is but one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, but at least there are a good many tuneful gradations from the carillon at Bruges to the Pancake Bell at Newbury. In "Poor Robin," so long ago as 1684, this renowned bell is mentioned in the following savoury couplet,—

"Hark, I hear the Pancake Bell,
And fritters make a gallant smell."

In this case one feels for the bellman, who, by the necessity of his calling, must have been shut out from his share of the dainty feast.

A still more curious bell was rung in the town of Preston, so lately as 1860. It was styled in the Lancashire vernacular "th' barm bell." An old man perambulated the town with large cans of yeast, and a big bell which he rang energetically to apprise the housekeepers of his arrival. The old gentleman was an institution, and, like not a few other old institutions, somewhat crotchety; we once heard a woman remark, when both bell and barm had failed to make their usual appearance, "that th' old fule war nobbut a sounden brass an' a tinglin cymbul wi' his bell an' his bounce."

In Southey's "Doctor," a short paragraph is devoted to the memory of a celebrated composer of church-bell music, named Dr. Patrick. He it was who composed the peal called "Stedman's Triples," till then deemed an impracticable feat; real double and treble bob-royals are also monuments of his superlative merits. Would that we were of the initiated, to appreciate these mysterious peals as they ought to be. This Dr. Patrick was interred at the church of St. Leonard's, Shoreditch. He was followed to the grave by all the ringing societies in London, each person sounding hand-bells with muffled clappers, the church-bells at the same time ringing a death peal.

Great, then, are the mysteries of bell-ringing! And this may be said in its praise, that, of all devices which men have sought out for obtaining distinction by making a noise in the world, it is the most harmless.* We might also go on for ever, for the subject, like the changes upon the bells, is inexhaustible. Madame de Sévigné says, "Chacun a son stile; le mien comme vous le voyez n'est pas laconique." It is impossible also to be condensed upon so fascinating a subject as bells; for, after all, we have not said a word about wedding bells, or birthday bells, or celebration bells, or ship bells, or fire bells, or muffin bells—or the dinner bell.

M. M. D.

* Southey.

TOLD ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

CHAPTER I.

VIOLET SILVER.

IT had its commencement like a romance of Fairy Land, amongst the roses and in the moonlight.

A great emerald bank overhung a vast lake, fringed at its foot with a golden beach, and crowned with great pines, mingling their spicy incense with the breath of the roses, swinging their crimson blossoms in the garden midway up the steep, where, on a natural terrace, glimmered the white walls of a pretty house.

A wide lawn sloped to the beach, bordered with guelder-rose-trees and acacias, shedding pearly globes and drooping feathery blooms in the air, heavy with dewy perfume ; and two or three beeches echoed back the sleepy murmur of the lake, as their leaves rustled softly in the passing wind.

From this wide lawn a maze of winding paths led in and out through glowing alleys of roses. Every kind of rose that ever blushed beneath the sun, or gently swayed in the summer breeze, was there. Hence it was that Mr. Arnold Silver's pretty villa by the inland lake was called "The Roses."

A hedge of dwarf myrtle enclosed this radiant spot : and, for artistic contrast with the masses of bloom within, some melancholy yew-trees stood darkly beyond the gates. This night the scene was inexpressibly beautiful. The moonlight poured down a flood of pale silver radiance, mingling with the traces of the sunset in the west, the pink hue deepening to amethyst where it kissed the lake ; and over head was the deep blue of the sky, decked with shining stars.

Far out on the lake a boat glided phantom-like across the diamond track of the moonlight, which seemed leading to the mysterious amethyst gates of the dim horizon. The lights of the villa, poised midway up the hill, sent lances of red light deep into the placid bosom of the night, whose wind was odorous with the scent of flowers.

A fountain opposite the drawing-room windows threw a column of water upwards, its spray, as it fell again, flashing like diamonds in the moonlight. And on the basin's marble margin stood a tall slender girl in a white dress, her arm over the neck of a white doe, at the feet of which crouched a fawn with great dusky eyes and a collar tinkling with silver bells round its graceful neck.

This was Violet Silver, the only child and heiress of Arnold Silver, the younger of those two great merchants, "Silver Brothers," who, as he fairy tales say, "might have eaten gold every day," or, like the

famous king and queen, have occupied themselves principally in "counting out their money," and found plenty of work at the same pleasant task.

Violet looked in the moonlight what the "garish day" would still behold her : a beautiful girl of winning loveliness, perfect in form and feature. Tall and lithe was she, with a pure face of delicate hue and contour, and dark blue eyes that could either flash or smile.

When the caprice was on her, she could be haughty as you please, and walk through the world with her head up to scorn the earth. This only occurred when her father, Mr. Arnold Silver, wrought himself to a pitch of despotism : forbidding her to skate on the lake (that other lake at their winter residence) when the ice was rotten, or refusing to let her ride her favourite vicious horse, Thunderer, or interfered in some other atrocious way. But latterly Violet had seemed much subdued.

Whose are those lines so happy in their simplicity?—

" Peace charmed the street beneath her feet,
And honour charmed the air,
And all astir looked kind on her,
And called her good as fair ! "

They describe that sweet Violet, that nineteen-year-old sylph, with the sinless brow and the radiant young eyes, better than words of mine could, though I wrote with a diamond pen. As she stood there, still as a statue under the moon, the two dumb companions at her feet, they looked like some lovely group of enchanted creatures suddenly turned to forms of pearl by the potent wave of a geni's hand.

Heaven alone knows what sublime thoughts made the girl's countenance so angelic, as her shining eyes went from star to star, her lips parted with breathless thought.

"Fairy," she said, coming out of her reverie, and patting the velvet skin of the snowy doe with her hand, "we like the moonlight sometimes, don't we? Especially when there are no ridiculous Charlies near to talk nonsense and disturb our meditations. Ah, 'mention an angel, and hear the flutter of its wings!'" she broke off. "Speak of Charlie, and smell his cigar!"

Charles Silver, her cousin, was emerging from the open French window of the dining-room. She turned to regard him with a glance curiously compounded of sunshine and shade—a subtle shade; not tangible enough to be called melancholy, but something very like it, in her great violet eyes.

He did not speak as he came up to her, but seated himself on the marble brim in silence. She caught the look of vexation on his countenance.

"There is something the matter, Charlie!" said she. "It is nothing about *that*, is it?"

"It just is about that," replied Charles Silver, ruefully. "The two have been at it, hammer and tongs, ever since you left the table! For my benefit, of course." And Mr Charles Silver groaned, and ran his fingers desperately through his crisp brown hair.

"Well," said Violet, with spirit, "I suppose I am to be consulted in the affair. I wonder at papa!" and a great flush swept over her face and neck, and stained the pretty hand lying on Fairy's collar.

"You'd wonder more had you been there," remarked Charlie, gloomily. "We are to be married on Christmas Day, my young lady."

"What?" demanded Violet.

"I shall be of age then, you know."

"What?" repeated Violet, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing, her cheeks flaming like scarlet roses.

"It is perfectly true!" said Charles. "I'm sure I am as sorry for the worry as you can be, Violet."

"You don't think I am going to marry you, do you, sir?"

"They don't want either of us to think at all, as it seems to me," was his answer. "It is awfully hard on us both, and—and on Daisy too, you know."

"What did papa say?" demanded Violet, imperiously. "Though you are my cousin, I think you are a coward, Charles Silver!"

"Do you? Sorry for that. Uncle Arnold held out a little: he thought we might be allowed a voice in the matter, you and I. But—you know my father, Violet! He put on one of those iron looks; and—and you needn't call a fellow names. I'd like very much to see you tell my father to his face that you'd not do as he wished."

"Oh!" said Violet, stretching out her round white arm like a young sibyl, her nostrils dilating as though there were the breath of coming war in the air, "I am not his daughter, and I am not afraid. If you promise faithfully to be as brave as I am, why—you will marry Daisy Leighton in time."

"I'll promise anything you like," said Charles. "As to Daisy, I intend to marry her. But for her, I should only have been too glad to take you, Violet. A fellow can't help these things, you know."

"Thank you!" said Violet, with superb disdain, elevating [her pretty nose toward the stars. "You need not apologise."

"The worst of it is, I dare not say a word to Daisy while things are in this state," grumbled he. "It might lead to no end of a complication."

"As to me," said Violet, fractiously, "I—I shall go into a convent or something, as soon as you are married, and

"With my hand on my bosom, my head on my knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow."

"O, come," said Charlie, much aggrieved at the tone; "what with

you and my father, I shall begin to wish I was dead. I'll go for a sailor!"

"Will you?"

"You know, Violet, I care for you as though you were my sister; and you turn me into ridicule without mercy! If I had a huge black moustache like *some* people, it would be different!" he added significantly. "*I know. I have seen.*"

Violet turned very pale in the moonlight. She sank down on the ledge of the fountain beside her cousin, and, taking his hand between her soft palms, laid her pretty cheek against it.

"Charlie, dear," she said softly, "you have just said you are fond of me."

"Yes," said Charlie, considerably mollified. "I am fonder of you than of any one in the world—Daisy excepted."

"Then you must promise never, never, never to—to allude to that again. Think of the fuss there'd be! Be quiet, Charles! *you* must not turn against me. I'll tell about you and Daisy if you do. You have your secrets, sir, and surely I may have mine. Promise—until I give you leave."

"I promise," said Charles Silver, who was the easiest-natured fellow in the world. "But, Violet, do you think it's just the thing to meet him in the way you do? Nobody knows the man."

Violet turned to caress Fairy, and so hid her bright blush from her cousin.

"Never mind, Charlie," she said, with a little quiver in her sweet young voice; "you may be quite at rest. You *know* I would not do anything that's wrong?"

"Of course, I know that."

"Very well. Then, as I say, you may be at rest. Go in and play your evening game at chess with Daisy, there's a good fellow: if we both stay out they may miss us. Oh, Charles!" she added, with impressive, almost solemn earnestness, as she took both his hands, "you do not know all the interests that are at stake. Papa and Uncle Aurelius must suspect nothing."

"I don't like mysteries," returned Charles Silver. "But I suppose I must depend upon you, Violet."

"You *may*," was the emphatic answer. And Violet once more laid her hand on Fairy's neck; while the fawn gambolled around, shaking airy peals from the silver bells.

Charles Silver, throwing away the end of his cigar, returned to the house. He pushed back the lace draperies of the drawing-room window, and stood at the shoulder of a tiny little creature, a girl of eighteen, with a Zingaree-like face and great, melancholy, dark eyes. She was sitting on a low ottoman, gazing blankly at the opposite wall, her slender brown hands clasped idly on a heap of glowing roses,

which she had been pulling from a Sèvres vase on a marble stand at her side. This was Daisy Leighton. She was in deep mourning, and looked a pathetic, dark little phantom in the glow and brightness of the pretty room. On the death of her father, she had come to the house of her guardian, Mr. Arnold Silver. That was only three months ago ; and she and Charles had employed the time in falling in love with each other—which would have been regarded as high treason by the authorities, and the young people knew it.

She heard Charles Silver's step ; and a slight quiver ran through her slender frame, and a dusky rose crept into her lovely face ; but she did not turn until he touched her arm very lightly. Then she slowly moved her eyes to his handsome young face. He was very like Violet, only that the brow was hardly so wide, or the outline of the chin at once so firm and delicate. It was a pleasant, lovable face, however, frank and bright, as the face of the young should be ; but a shadow darkened it as Daisy Leighton's eyes met his. He drew back a little from her, her face was so full of fire, such a tempest of jealous rage lightened her dilated eyes. The fact was, things had been all at cross-purposes lately, and Daisy had caught up the idea that Charles had been only playing with her—that he had deserted her for his cousin.

Daisy rose, letting the roses fall in a mass to the carpet. She flung out her little hand, as though appealing against him.

"Traitor !" she said, between her little white teeth, "coward and traitor ! I saw you with her by the fountain."

Charlie's dark blue eyes assumed a look of mingled anger and perplexity.

"Upon my word, Daisy !" he said in a low tone, "what next ? I am quite tired of these fits of temper. Is it jealousy?—of Violet? What a silly child you are !"

She looked at him with a singular smile, her dark face paling to the very lips. Charles took her hands tenderly in his : he stooped until his brown hair touched hers. There could be no mistake made by any spectator then as to where his true love was given.

And, unfortunately, there was a spectator. His father had entered silently, and stood there in the shade of the large room, looking on.

Aurelius Silver was a stern-looking man, with a face such as one sees on an old Roman medal, and thick masses of sparkling silver hair clustering round his lofty brow. One could imagine him that Roman who gave his son, fresh from a glorious victory, to the sword of the executioner. His eagle eyes took in the agitation of Charles and Daisy at a glance : he saw how it was ; and in his bitter anger, suppressing his furious passion, he stole away, to give vent to that passion out of doors, and to *think*.

The lovers had not perceived him. Charles, indeed, was wholly taken up with Daisy. Never had he seen her like this before—and

he resented it : resented her want of confidence in him. It is true that he could not speak to any purpose—for he was not sure how events might turn out, or that Daisy could ever be his ; and he was not one to fly in the face of a father's mandate. All that kept him from speaking. A sharpish quarrel ensued.

"Listen to me, Daisy," he said at length. "I cannot help myself just now, I am not my own master ; but you may be sure —"

No, she would not listen. Passion over-mastered her. She tore the little brown fingers from his grasp ; and, with an inarticulate cry of emotional rage, sprang through the open window and fled out into the moonlight.

Charles would not go after her. His first thought was of Violet.

"I hope they'll not meet," he said to himself, as he stood outside the glass doors. "They might come to an issue if they did, in Daisy's present temper. What in the world possesses her ?"

At that moment, as he looked out across the moonlit lawn, it seemed as though a cry came to his ears from the direction of the lake. He listened ; but it was not repeated. And just then Violet came swiftly towards him from an opposite direction, tall and white as a spirit, in her fluttering, misty dress.

CHAPTER II.

AU REVOIR.

MR. SILVER, in his icy rage, strode out into the moonlight at a sharp pace, taking the direction of the lake. The scene he had just witnessed, the knowledge that had burst upon him, filled his whole soul with the intensest wrath. For years and years it had been his darling wish to see his son and niece united : not more for the sake of uniting the large fortune of the Brothers Silver, than because he so loved Violet.

He loved his son with a great love, and he coveted Violet for him. There had been another son once, but he "was not :" one many years older than Charles : Charles alone remained to him, and on him was concentrated all his affection. Just at the point when success had crowned his wishes—for his brother Arnold had, this very self-same evening, given consent to the marriage—it was maddening to find his airy fabric of Hope dashed to the ground by the glancing wing of the bright little creature who had flitted so inopportunely across his path. "Why," he said to himself, as his black shadow swiftly traversed the pearly light, bathing the emerald slope of the lawn, "I could crush her with a touch ! And yet I foresee as exhausting a conflict with her as with a simoom in the desert, and perhaps as hopeless. Charles, too ! But I don't so much blame him. She has bewitched him. I wish she had never come here !"

A grim smile darkened, rather than brightened, his majestic face,

and he closed his iron lips until the fine curves of the resolute mouth were lost in one firm bar, as unyielding as death itself. Onwards he strode, his step fiercer and more fierce.

"Daisy Leighton must be got rid of," he continued, silently. "I have never yielded a jot of my will yet to mortal, and it would be strange, indeed, if the folly of a boy and girl should turn me aside from the purpose of my life—that of joining the house and fortune of my brother with my own. Yes; I must disclose to Arnold what I have discovered, and get him to appoint some other home for her."

A narrow path led him through the grove of willows to the border of the lake. It was darker here: the trees hid the moon. Mr. Silver was no longer angry. He had taken his rage by the throat and planted his foot upon it, after the fashion he had followed with Fate itself in his busy life. He was even a little amused with himself for his brief passion. "One would almost imagine it a thing of consequence," he said to himself; "the poor young simpletons! It is only boy and girl fancy."

Pushing aside the screen of drooping willow boughs, he was about to step downwards on the little beach, glistening with its golden sand under the moonbeams, when, as though stung by an adder, he drew back into the impenetrable shade of the clustering trees, amid which his face gleamed as though hewn from ivory. All his fierce anger had gathered again, its intensity nearly paralysing him. But for that, he would immediately have revealed himself: his haughty spirit spurned the idea of spying on the actions of others.

A light boat trembled on the edge of the water lower down, partially shaded by the overhanging willow-branches. In it stood a man, young and handsome, as it seemed to him,—a man with a black beard and moustache, who was pushing it out from the shore. As Mr. Silver looked, it freed itself from the tiny beach, and tossed on the long, purple, voiceless swell of the lake. The man turned his dark, handsome face, his lustrous eyes, to the shore.

"Good-bye, my love!" he said in a low and cautious voice: and a white-robed girl kissed both her hands to him, her deep eyes radiant, her rosy lips quivering and smiling. It was Violet Silver.

"*Au revoir*: not good-bye," she whispered. "Go—oh, go! I think I hear footsteps!"

She turned and fled quickly towards the house, her golden hair and her white dress drifting out behind her like a vapour. And the man, with a long, powerful stroke of his oar, swept along under the bank; and, turning the sharp curve there, was lost to sight.

Aurelius Silver drew a heavy breath, which almost seemed to tear the muscles of his vast chest; and, with the port of a Caesar defied by rebellious Helots, parted the screen of willows and stepped out on the fairy beach, baring his lofty brow as he did so to the freshening wind,

which was stealing across the lake, leaving footprints of faintest foam as it came. A complication had arisen which, in one glance, he saw could hardly fail of ruining his hopes, unless indeed his action was prompt, vigorous, and—unsparing. And of all men who ever tore the golden prize from the hand of Fortune, Aurelius Silver knew how to be unsparing to others and to himself. He had rarely done a generous deed, but he had never done a dishonourable one. Some natures resemble masses of grim rock threaded with veins of gold, but to the cold walls of which no tender parasite clings, no vine of beauty connects them with the warmth and sunshine of human life. Mr. Silver neither gave nor expected sympathy. He had his virtues; but they were of the high Roman sort. He was honourable, he was temperate, he was courageous. The hidden fire which lurks in man, as in nature, was there, but it neither brightened his life nor that of others.

"So!" he said, with a deep breath. "Violet also!"

The expression of his face boded but little good towards the girl. She was the only creature he had permitted himself to love, Charles excepted; and for the very reason that she was dear to him, he absolutely hated her in this moment, when he found her young spirit had freed itself from the shackles of his will.

Turning to the left, he walked along the edge of the bank. The strip of beach below dwindled to a mere golden thread. The lake was very deep just here. Aurelius Silver glanced back at his brother's house. Against the lights in the drawing-room beyond the rose garden, the fountain threw up its diamond spray; and, against it again, a little black form seemed to be rushing down frantically like a phantom. It was Daisy Leighton. She was coming towards where Mr. Silver stood; and all his dreadful anger was again aroused as he recognized her.

It all passed in a moment. Whether the girl could not stop herself in time; whether her foot slipped at the bank's edge; or whether in her uncontrollable passion she flung herself forward, could not be told; but there she was, in the lake below, just beneath Aurelius Silver.

One wild cry, one glimpse of her ghastly little face and flashing eyes; one short, sharp struggle with the treacherous water; and then all was still as before, save that widening rings of silver chased each other out across the lake, and drove its waters lapping in sudden life over the belt of sand.

A mighty shudder ran through the vast frame of Aurelius Silver. He was a strong swimmer: what ailed him that he made no effort to save the distraught child from the grave she had fallen into? In that moment, a demon spoke to his soul. "Oh, man, why trouble thyself? Fate has crushed this one obstacle out of thy path. Make her evil thy good."

Was there a despairing voice abroad, sighing through the pines and

across the purple, silver-crested swells of the lake, sighing over the sudden fall of him who had walked well amongst men from the high throne of his boasted honour? Were the stars changed to orbs of fire and blood, as his burning eyes turned towards them?

With his silver hair lifting itself stiffly from his head, with a hand of fire grasping his heart, with eyes that saw and ears that heard not, Aurelius Silver turned away from the lake.

CHAPTER III.

"LORD, KEEP MY MEMORY GREEN!"

AN old stone house standing outside a town at least a hundred miles away from the beautiful summer villa of Arnold Silver. A house standing back from the highway and flanked with great dark trees, old and weird-looking as those in Gustave Doré's picture of the "Hewing of the Cedars for the Temple." The mansion itself lay square, massive, low-browed; its walls were of granite, with that faint suggestion of rose and aqua-marine flowing through the stone, which renders some of those old buildings so mellow and picturesque. The windows were small and formal; the chimneys, standing up against the sky, cowled and hooded like hermits on a mountain top; and from the great eaves, giant lances of diamond, the handiwork of the fairy armourer King Frost, were hanging like the spears of Titans in some enchanted land. A carriage-drive swept round from the great gates of sombre bronze to the stone step, guarded on either side by a stone lion couchant, of an amiable, not to say benevolent aspect. A hall-door of polished oak stood hospitably open in the winter's sun.

This was the home of the elder brother, Aurelius Silver. It was the custom of the two families to spend the winter together here, and the summer at the villa of the younger, Arnold.

But they had quitted the villa earlier than usual this year. There was a certain night in August that had struck its inmates with perplexity, if not terror. Margaret Leighton—or Daisy, as they fondly called her—had disappeared. After a quarrel with Charles—he had confessed to that—she tore from him in a little tempest of fury. Only to the garden, as he supposed, to cool herself by the fountain, or amid the roses: but she had never come back again. From that mysterious hour she had disappeared. Charles and Violet had remained together in the drawing-room talking; talking, and waiting for her to make her appearance; how long they scarcely knew. But she did not come. Mr. Arnold Silver had gone to rest straight from the dinner-table that night, not being well. Mr Silver (Aurelius) had chanced to take a long country walk that night: the night was so fine that it had tempted him, he told them when he came in—and that was not until close upon midnight. Where was Daisy, they asked him—for Charles and Violet

had taken up the notion that the two absent ones must be strolling about together. Daisy? retorted Mr. Silver, at the question—what should he know about Daisy? But that he caught up some alarm in regard to her was evident, for his face turned strangely pale.

Well, from that hour, no trace of Daisy had been found. The family and the servants were searching about all night, Charles in a distracted state, but they did not find her. They never had found her. What her fate was, could not be conjectured with any certainty : some thought she had run away ; others cast dim fears towards the lake. Aurelius Silver never enlightened them, nor told a hint of the grave secret the lake might have disclosed.

And when all search was abandoned as hopeless, they had quitted the villa, which somehow seemed full of discomfort, for the distant winter mansion. And the weeks had gone on, and this was Christmas Eve. Little more had been said about the union of the two cousins : even Mr. Silver no longer urged it.

In the dining-room of this fine old house sat Violet Silver, making wreaths of holly and ivy. The walls were panelled with oak, richly brown and lustrous, tossing to and fro in their shining depths the scarlet leapings and writhings of the great fire burning on the hearth, lordly logs like prostrate pillars of carbuncle, glowing ruddily and filling the room with a rosy illumination. The ceiling was painted with a gorgeously-hued picture of Jove banqueting, squired by a golden-haired Ganymede, while his eagles plumed their pinions at his feet.

A mighty buffet of Spanish oak, a mass of rare carving, and antique enough in appearance to have been taken from the "rich, dim city" which Merlin waved into existence with his wand, bore an array of silver plate, rich, rare, and old, catching the firelight with fine effect on fretted wreath and grinning griffin head, the crest of the family. For the rest, a great dining-table and vast chairs of oak and ruby velvet, a grim portrait or two on the wall, ancient Silvers, as might be seen by the handsome features ; and Violet in a blue cashmere dress. Mourning had not been put on for Daisy. Arnold Silver would not hear of it : he refused to believe that she was dead.

Violet sighed as she worked. The girl's face was changed in some subtle way since that night we saw her by the fountain. A shade more pensive, a thought less radiant, the eyes deeper in expression, the lips parting less readily in laughter and speech : such was the change. The same change, but intensified a hundredfold, was repeated in Charlie Silver's countenance. He sat near her : watching in silence her long, rosy fingers as they twined the emerald sprays into a long, clustering wreath, flecked here and there with the fire of scarlet berries, dug from beneath the white drifts in the woods.

His faced was indescribably changed. The features were sharper,

the glance of the eye firmer, the lines of the mouth and chin more resolute and decided. The face, which had been like Violet's, had developed more into a resemblance to Aurelius Silver. A gracious likeness, though; retaining what was finest and noblest in the older face, yet lacking the cold and commanding expression which gleamed icily in its large and stern eyes.

There were lines in Charlie's forehead now. Four months previously he had hardly looked his age; now he looked ten years older.

"Charlie, how idle you are!" said Violet, breaking a long pause. "Hand me some more sprays of holly, please. There, how do you like my wreath?"

"Very well," said Charlie, listlessly obeying the mandate. "What a pretty Idyll of Christmas Eve you make, Violet," he added, looking at her. "You have a gracious beauty about you, such as the spirit of the day should have."

"Thanks! I like compliments," said Violet, very sincerely. "You are as good-looking as I am, Charlie; and this wreath is destined to frame our great-grandmother yonder. How droll she looks in that powdered wig and brocaded dress, simpering at her woolly flock! What flourishing ideas of Arcadia those dear old people must have had!"

The wreath was finished. Charles Silver called for some steps, and mounted to festoon the wreath round the massive old frame of the portrait, which hung over the carved mantelpiece. Violet stood by to watch him. There was an unusual sadness in both of them to-day, for they were about to separate. She resumed her seat, and began another wreath.

"I always detest the perfume of this burning wood," she exclaimed impatiently, as Charles came back to his chair. "Do you know, if Uncle Aurelius hadn't developed an extraordinary enthusiasm for Christmas decorations, I should not have had the heart to undertake them this year."

"I can imagine that," said Charles, quietly.

"Your going away is the worst of all, Charlie."

"It is very pleasant to know that I shall have some one to think kindly and lovingly of me when I am away," he observed. "I can quite understand that quaint old prayer, 'Lord, keep my memory green!'"

"Charlie!" said Violet, with startled eyes, "you speak as if you never meant to return to us! Surely you are not going from us with that idea in your mind? Think of your father."

"Think of you all, you mean, Violet," he answered, sadly. "I cannot control fate, child. An impression seems to lie on my mind that I may never return."

"Then why, oh! why do you go?"

"I must go, Violet: I cannot rest here. Every hour I am reminded

of her. There's nothing for me but change. Heaven above knows how I loved her, and what her strange loss has been to me!"

Violet's hot tears fell on the wreath. But she dashed them away with her hand, and looked at him hopefully.

"Time," she said, "will bring its cure. You are so very young, Charlie!"

"Not too young 'to keep my memory green,'" he said, repeating his former words softly. "In time, in time, I may come back again, dear. You will be a happy wife then, with children about your knees."

He rose as he spoke and left the room, wishing her good-bye until dinner-time. She worked on soberly until her wreaths were finished, and then went up to her chamber, carrying some sprays of holly with her that her maid was to dispose of on her white dinner dress.

But Violet was very restless. She knew why. A task, which she had undertaken, was to be performed that evening; and she knew not whether it would turn out for good or for ill.

"I had thought to have Daisy with me this Christmas," she sighed softly to herself. "Oh, what was become of her? Is she in death, or in life?"

Her thoughts were becoming painful. Quitting her chamber, she went downstairs again. The great square hall had its Christmas draperies of green wreaths and holly-berries; and was flooded with the crimson firelight from its wide hearth. Violet drew back into the shade to admire the effect of the decorations, which had been done by the servants.

Suddenly the house was startled by a shriek, and a cry, and a fall. Servants and others rushed into the hall, whence it came, and there found Violet. She lay on the floor, like an image of snow, perfectly unconscious, a look of intensest horror frozen on her lovely face. .

"I never knew her to faint before," said Arnold Silver, quaking in every limb, as Aurelius lifted her from the ground, and carried her into the dining-room. "My darling! What can have happened?"

"Nothing," said Aurelius, quietly. "Because she never has fainted, there is no reason that she should not do so. Violet has not seemed herself of late."

He laid her very tenderly and gently on a couch, touching her cheek caressingly with his fingers as he did so.

"She is reviving," he said quietly. "Stand back, Arnold. Give her air."

"My precious one, what was it?" questioned her father. "Were you alarmed by anything?"

"Oh! father, I don't know what it was," wailed Violet. "I—I think I must have fallen into a dream. If you will take me up to my room, I'll lie down till dinner-time."

Arnold Silver took her, and charged her maid not to leave the chamber.

CHAPTER IV.

VIOLET'S STORY.

"AND so, it being Christmas Eve," said Violet, "and just our own four selves here, I will tell you a story."

It was after dinner. The dessert was on the table : wine flushing redly, a glow of rare exotics in a great silver basket, fruit blushing in dainty Sèvres dishes. Saucy pages of the same priceless ware held aloft baskets of grapes, glistening like amethysts and emeralds in the wax lights.

The Silvers had drawn from the table and were gathered round the fire, which burned royally, as a Christmas fire should. In its full glow sat Violet at her father's feet, looking, in her white robes with their dainty green and red sprays, like a lovely Idyll of the season, as Charles had phrased it. She was quite herself again, had apparently forgotten the fainting fit and its cause ; and the holly-berries, gleaming in the glossy coronal of her golden hair, were not more vividly crimson than her cheeks and lips. Her eyes were starry, shining, dilated, wonderful in their rapid changes of expression, as she glanced from one to the other of the group. She looked at Aurelius Silver, as he sat on the opposite side of the hearth, his noble face and head thrown finely out by the ruby velvet back of the deep chair in which he sat, and she smiled as she spoke. She held in her hand a fan of white feathers, the handle of rubies and dead gold, and when she drooped her head, its shade fell across her face.

"A story!" said her father, smiling. "And why not, my dear? It is a time-honoured custom at Christmas-tide. Do you remember, Autelius, how our poor father and mother used to tell us youngsters Christmas tales, in this very room?"

"I remember," said Aurelius Silver, quietly.

"And how we had Mère Margaton's tales of the Loup-Garou and Feu-follet, in the nursery?" continued Arnold, "and how frightened I used to be? You were not. You never feared anything during the whole course of your existence, I do believe, Aurelius."

Aurelius Silver started very slightly, and looked at his brother ; but his answer was spoken in his usual composed tones.

"Let us hear Violet's story, by all means. It is not likely to be very fearful, is it, Pussy?"

"No," cried Violet, eagerly, "it is a story about people like ourselves. There could be nothing very fearful about *us*, for instance ; could there, Uncle Aurelius?"

"No," said Aurelius, smiling strangely, as he looked into the fire. "We are anciently respectable, commonplace members of the community. Far above comment. Infinitely beyond temptation."

"Go on, Violet," said Charles, breaking the silence and glancing at his father, whose voice had a curious ring in it. Indeed, of late, a certain strangeness had crept into the life and manners of Aurelius Silver, which those about him had not failed to notice and wonder at.

Until this winter, Arnold Silver had been alone in the almost princely benevolence which had made the name of Silver revered and blest amid the poor : but lately the elder brother had outdone him in generosity. If possible he was quieter, more reticent than ever, though at times a strange disturbance seemed to reign in his soul, and he would retire from the society of the family, remaining secluded for many hours at a stretch in his library. Who shall say what phantom of remorse sat by his board, visible but to himself? Who shall tell the anguish of such a soul as his, reflecting on the moment of temptation which had been sufficient to hurl from its high place of arrogant security that cold and jealous integrity, that stern rectitude and honour, which he had erected into a deity and bowed the knee to idolatrously? Its crest had towered to the skies, its feet of clay were on the shifting sands. There be no such mighty Iconoclast for your idol of self-security, as temptation ; a truth Aurelius Silver had waded through a sea of fire to learn and understand.

How often the memory of that starlit and peaceful night, when he had turned his back upon the lake, and on one drowning there, had flashed upon his remorseful soul! The secret of that temptation lay buried within his own breast ; buried, he hoped, for ever. This Upas-tree memory had borne some good fruit. When he found Charles firm as a rock in his determination to remain faithful to the memory of Daisy Leighton, he had not urged him to break that determination, or threatened, or disowned him, as most assuredly he would have once done. He had not even opposed his son's projected departure, which was to take place at the New Year, but quietly watched the preparations for it.

"Wait until the year is out," he had said to Charles, emphatically and firmly. "If you retain the same mind then, I will say no more. But until then, stay where you are. You are very young, Charles, and youth is the changeful April time of a man's life. Wait."

And Charles had waited, but he had not changed at all. He meant to go as soon as the New Year came in. He meant to remain true to Daisy Leighton ; and through his soul there ever rang an appealing and plaintive voice, "Keep my memory green!"

"Papa!" said Violet, putting her hand on her father's, and turning her wistful eyes to his, "in my story there is a girl, like me, and perhaps you will think her wicked and ungrateful to her father, who is just like you ; but you will hear all about her quite to the end before you say so. Won't you, papa?"

"If she is like my little girl, she can't be *very* bad;" said Arnold

Silver, laughing proudly, and patting her pretty hand. "Go on, my dear, we are all anxiety to hear this tale."

Violet turned her face from theirs, clasped her hands on her lap, and fixed her eyes musingly on the leaping amethyst and molten gold of the flames, licking the great sides of the logs on the huge andirons, and began her tale. In her voice there was something strangely timorous, just as though she feared to tell it.

"Some years ago, there were two brothers, partners in a great business, just, papa, as you and Uncle Aurelius are; and one of them had two sons, and the other only one little child, a girl; and the two mothers were dead. Now, the elder brother, the father of the two boys, was a strange man, cold and haughty and like iron in everything he said and did; and when his wife died—he was very fond of her—he ——"

"What are you telling?" interrupted Mr. Silver.

"Hear me to the end, please, Uncle Aurelius."

"Yes, yes, the tale must be heard to the end," put in Arnold Silver. And Violet went on.

"This elder brother grew colder and harder, though I know it was only pride; in his heart he was good. His eldest son, who was many years older than the other, was like the dear mother who had died, and a generous high-spirited lad, and I am *quite* sure all the time the father hardly seemed to know he had a son: he was proud and fond of his boy, only it was not his way to show his heart to the world. But he must have loved him. Don't you think so, papa?"

"I suppose so, Pussy," said Arnold Silver, very soberly, and looking straight at the fire. Aurelius never spoke. His face lay in the shadow cast by the marble pillars of the mantelpiece. Violet glanced at him. Her eyes were very bright; her sweet young voice was steady and clear as silver as she resumed her story.

"How much that poor young man was to be pitied!—that firstborn son! He was left so much to himself: his father was so absorbed in his own business that he had no time to see the evil which was gathering around the lad—and he was only eighteen. Had he seen it, he would have been so angry that he might not have moved a finger to save him. Not that he meant to be cruel; you must not think that for a moment: but he said and thought that, for a truly honourable and upright nature, there could be no such thing as temptation."

Aurelius Silver winced: and drew his face further into the shade.

"He said that those who fell, fell from inclination; and as they fell, so, for him, should they lie. For it had come about that his son had done something very, very wrong about money matters: that he might have been tried for. Are you listening, papa?"

Arnold Silver slightly nodded, but spoke not. He was looking as though he did not much like the tale.

"Well, the boy's father quietly turned him adrift, 'to herd,' as he said, 'with the dregs of the earth his crime had levelled him to.' He was cold and impassive still, as I have heard. I don't believe he even seemed angry: but none of us can fancy what he felt in his secret soul. He must have thought that, perhaps, if he had acted differently himself, watched and guarded the boy from corrupt influences, this would not have happened: and oh, how dreadful that thought must have been! But the boy disappeared."

"And thus your story ends," said Aurelius Silver impatiently, as though he wished it over.

"No, Uncle Aurelius, it has a sequel. Had it ended there, I should never have told it. Perhaps never have known it."

"Go on, Violet," said Charles, who was staring at her with all the earnestness of his deep-blue eyes.

"The son went on board ship, and escaped to another country. There he turned over a new leaf, and began to work in earnest. It was California—where fortunes are to be made for the trying. He had a great and a good heart, this son, and it carried him on eagle wings, far above the associations, such as they were, of his former life. For years he battled on manfully, and he gained fortune; and in the faint hope that his father had forgotten all but that he was his eldest son, he turned his steps homeward and came back over the seas."

Violet stopped; it seemed from emotion. Her cheeks were flushing and paling.

"He came back safely, this son, and went to his own home; not openly, but cautiously; in secret, that is. There he met his cousin, now a woman grown, how it does not matter; and oh! papa, she was very, very like me; but don't begin to hate her just yet: and he begged that she would try to soften his father toward him; and, from one thing to another, the girl and he got to—to love each other better than all the world. They met very often, but he had to go away up to town about his affairs more than once, and while he was there the last time, the family went away from their pretty summer villa; and he and she did not meet again until a few days ago. And she promised and promised to beg his father to forgive him; but she was such a coward," cried Violet, bursting into tears, "as well as such a wicked, deceitful thing to her own father, who was the best and dearest in the whole wide world, that she put off speaking until Christmas Eve: and, oh! uncle, that's—that's the story, and you must finish it."

Violet turned, fell into her father's arms, which folded tightly about her, and hid her face amid the ruffles decorating his expansive chest.

"Aurelius Silver," said Arnold, solemnly, as Violet trembled in his arms, "I charge you to finish it as your heart and conscience urge you to do. I gather that the young man is here. Dear Aurie!—as we used to call him. Remember how we loved him!"

A peculiar smile, gracious yet shadowed, crossed the lofty face of Aurelius Silver. He rose and came toward them.

"Doubly my daughter!" he said, taking Violet into his arms, and kissing her pure, young brow: "the good Angel of this Christmas Eve. You shall finish your Christmas tale as you will."

"Papa, dear," cried Violet, the tears dropping, "tell me that you don't hate me for my dreadful deceit. I could not help it; indeed I could not."

"I shall get over it in time, I daresay, Pussy," replied he with twinkling eyes. "Did you know of this, Charles?"

"Partly," replied Charles. "I did not know until now that he was my brother. To say the truth, I thought the affair was over and done with. I will go and find him."

They came back arm in arm. A man with dark lustrous eyes and the kingly port of the Silvers, but with a face all his own and his dead mother's. Such was Aurelius the younger. Violet stood by her father, her eyes glistening. Mr. Silver, showing more emotion than anyone would have believed, clasped his son's outstretched hands.

"Welcome home, my boy," he whispered. And, retaining still the hands, he turned to his brother.

"Arnold," he said, "where is your welcome?"

"Here," replied Arnold Silver, taking Violet's rosy hand and placing it in his nephew's: "one more expressive than words."

"A good gift!" said Aurelius Silver, musingly. "It is but exchanging one brother for the other. She was to have been yours, Charles."

"She and I never thought that, father."

"Your brother is leaving us—for California, or elsewhere," said Mr. Silver to his new-found son. "Possibly you may have heard of it—and its cause?"

"Yes," was the answer, given in a tone of sad sympathy. "Perhaps Charlie will stay here, though, now I am come."

There was a moment's pause. Mr. Silver broke it.

"Violet, as Charles's promised bride, I bought you a set of jewels. As the betrothed of my son Aurelius, I should like to clasp them on your neck and arms."

"Oh, uncle, thank you--thank you!" was Violet's impulsive answer. "How good you are! How good everyone is!"

Mr. Silver left the room, to fetch, as was supposed, the promised jewels. But he seemed rather long about it. Violet was talking to Charles when he returned, her eyes pitiful.

"This Christmas has held nothing for you," she said; "it is very sad."

"Except a darling sister and brother," said Charlie, clasping her hands in his.

"And wife!" said the voice of Aurelius Silver behind them.

They turned their faces to him, in a silence born of awe,—a pallid silence, through which Violet's voice rang out in wild exultation.

"Daisy ! Oh, Charlie, this was the ghost I saw to-day ! She was looking out of that private room of my uncle's, and I thought it was a real ghost, and fainted away. I was ashamed to confess it afterwards : I supposed I must have been in a dream."

Aurelius Silver stood towering like some lofty column, crested with sparkling snow ; and by his side a dark and beautiful little creature, whose wide and speaking eyes were fixed on Charles's face.

"Take her," said Mr. Silver to his son Charles. "She is yours. When she fell into the lake—for that was the cause of her disappearance, her eyesight no doubt deceiving her—I was close at hand, and fortunately was enabled to save her ——"

"Do you mean you got her out, Uncle Aurelius ?" interrupted Violet, in her eagerness.

"Yes, I got her out."

"But why did you not bring her home ?"

"She was quite insensible : and I thought she would recover better in the gamekeeper's cottage ; and so I conveyed her thither. She had an illness after that—a fever. For some weeks she was not herself ; and the gamekeeper's wife attended on her. I enjoined silence on them. Before she at all recovered, we left the villa for this place."

"But, uncle, *why* did you not tell us ? Why have let us suffer all that suspense and distress ?"

"I had my reasons for it," calmly replied Mr. Silver. "For one thing, I wished to see what Charles's professed love for her really was : whether it would last, or was but ephemeral, as a butterfly's summer day. She is here now, and you may make the most of her."

"He has been as a dear father to me," whispered Daisy, with tears in her eyes. "As a dear, loving, generous father. Oh, you cannot think how good he is : and we used to think him so proud and stern !"

It had been all as Mr. Silver said. No sooner had he turned his back upon the lake that night, than the awful wickedness of his conduct flashed over him in blood-red colours. With a half-breathed prayer for forgiveness he rushed back, and rescued Daisy. She could not be said to have quite recovered yet ; but he had caused her to be brought to them here, had smuggled her into the house that afternoon at dusk, that she might take her place once more amid them this Christmas Eve. But he never supposed there was a surprise in store for himself as well as for them—in the restoration of his elder son. He had believed him to be dead : and it was perhaps the distress of his loss, the self-reproach for his own conduct, that had rendered him in manner so hard and stern. The sternness would give place now to loving generosity. Truly, God had been very good to him !

"Do you like them, Arnold ?"

He turned Violet to face her father, the brilliant diamonds gleaming on her neck, in her ears, on her fair arms; flashing, costly, priceless gems, worth almost a king's ransom.

"Aurelius! how extravagant you have been! How could you spend so much on mere ornaments?"

"It seems to me, Arnold, that I could spend the whole of my fortune this night, and not regret it."

"In thankfulness for Aurie's safety?"

"I have a deeper cause for thankfulness than even that," was the answer. "None will ever know how deep, save God!"

"And, Charles, I suppose you will give up your sea-going trip?"

"I expect I shall, Uncle Arnold."

"You'll have to forfeit your passage-money, young sir."

"I'll put the receipt for it up to auction and sell it to the highest bidder," retorted Charles, a laughing happiness in his eyes that had long been absent from them.

The silvery-toned clock on the mantel-piece, rang out twelve. Violet turned to look at it, her diamonds flashing.

"Midnight!" she exclaimed with surprise. "Who ever would have thought it could be so late? Why, this is Christmas morning! What a happy Christmas Eve it has been!"

"A merry Christmas to us all, my dear ones!" spoke Aurelius Silver with emotion; "to you especially, Daisy, and to you, my new-found son God has been so merciful to us in this past year: so merciful! It might have been a worse Christmas than any of you can dream of. Hark! there are the bells."



THE DAY OF DEATH.

Oh, pleasant day of rest!
Oh, day so calm and blest,
When greyer grows the light upon the
hill!

When songs resound no more
From childhood's sunny shore,
And the sparkle vanishes from pleasure's
rill!

Oh, day of labour done!
Oh, golden set of sun,
When calmly we look back upon our
toll!

When fever frets are o'er,
When pain can hurt no more,
And joy's sweet rose fades in its earthy
soil!

Oh, day so fleet and fair!
Oh, end of ceaseless care,
That frowns upon us from sullen
shore!
The day of tender doom
That smiles from out the gloom
Is fairer far than all that went before.

MISTLETOE.

THE romance of the Mistletoe-Bough!—who is there that does not understand it? Who that has not many memories connected with that curiously-shaped, pale-coloured leaf, with its firm, alabaster-like berries? Who cannot recall a time when the very name of Mistletoe had in it something of mysterious delight; when the hanging up of the Mistletoe-Bough was the acknowledged signal for more than ordinary joyousness and mirth, belonging as it did, exclusively to Christmas-tide: proclaiming that Christmas—long-expected, “Merry Christmas”—had actually arrived: that “Father Christmas,” that hoary-headed, much-loved patriarch, was already in our midst!

The ringing laughter of the children, the joyous schoolboy shout, the pattering of little feet; loving greetings, loving wishes, exchanged under its branches—what has it not heard? Is it strange that we should love it? Is it strange that the sight of it should set us elder ones musing, while the children still laugh and play beneath its shadows?

But to us there are other shadows mingling with its memories—the shadows which Time always throws upon the Past—tinging them, it may be, with sadness, toning down their radiancy, but leaving them still bright.

And these graver thoughts are not all of our own experiences; there are graver memories too clinging round those branches—sadder scenes on which the mistletoe has looked down. As our thoughts wander over the Past, we find ourselves slipping back, almost unconsciously, into far distant ages—into days of which we have only read, but which nevertheless find us matter enough for meditation, and reasons to thank God, to increase our gladness, and swell our Christmas Hymn of Praise.

And why? Listen to that wild sound rising from yonder barren, moonlit plain; hark how the discordant notes rise and clash against each other, like angry waves lashing some rocky coast; music it cannot be called, it is only noise; but there is an awful meaning in the din. Vehement shouts re-echo through the air, but they are shouts of a would-be *worship*—cries of a people on their unknown God, whose avenging wrath can, they think, only be propitiated by a hideous sacrifice. And, mingling with those shouts, comes ever and anon a bitter, agonizing wail, which now and then rises almost to a shriek; it is a human cry—the cry of despairing human victims, condemned to a cruel death!

See, yonder, winding along the plain, comes the solemn procession of priests, whose brows are encircled with leaves of the sacred oak, and whose white robes glisten in the moonlight. Thousands of worshippers swelling their train, and in their midst the victims, bound helplessly hand and foot. On and on the procession wends its way, till it turns out of the clear, calm moonlight into the deep gloom of a so-called sacred grove : a clustering group of oak-trees—sacred, alas ! to horrible Druid rites—whose thickly-knotted branches screen from the light of sun or moon deeds which are literally works of darkness, in which the “Prince of Darkness” only could delight.

Here, or rather at the entrance of the grove, the procession halts; for, on the foremost of these ancient trees, the Mistletoe has taken root ; and as the fostering oak is holy, the plant which it has nurtured becomes holy also, and a fitting object for religious veneration.

The worshippers range themselves around. Then, mid a solemn silence, the most aged of the priests mounts, and severs with a golden knife the plant which he fondly deems to be a gift direct from Heaven. It falls into the white robe of the priest, who stands below waiting thus reverently to receive it.

So far all is well. At least, the rites thus ignorantly performed are not cruel. But, alas ! this is but the mystic prelude to a more terrible reality. The blood of the victims must now be shed ; the sacred grove must become a slaughter-house, and re-echo with the groans of the dying. And then will follow thanksgiving to the now propitiated Deities ; and wild, heathenish festivities.

And all this the Mistletoe-Bough has witnessed.

And now contrast with this another coming scene. Look down upon those fields, where, beneath the quiet glow of an Eastern sky, shepherds are watching over their flocks by night. The only sounds which break the silence of the air are the movements of the flock grazing peacefully in the moonlight. All else is still.

But see ! On yonder hillock where the shepherds have made their bivouac, a sudden light appears. Behold them starting eagerly to their feet, and then prostrating themselves in awe and wonder. What has happened ? In the glory of that light has appeared a Heavenly Visitant, who has brought to them “glad tidings of great joy,” and lo ! as he withdraws, a multitude of the Heavenly Host gather round ; the glowing light becomes radiant as burnished silver, and the music of angel-voices resounds among the hills. Softly, clearly, comes the chorus —heard now for the first time by mortal ears—“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men !” Why ? Because, as the Angel has said, “To you, and to all mankind, is born, this night, a Saviour—Christ the Lord !”

To you is now revealed a Saviour’s love ; to you is manifested that wondrous scheme, which, beginning in the secret counsels of an all-power-

ful but *all-loving* God, is now to be worked out and perfected for ever ; and to become, for men and angels, the theme of never-ending adoration. Not by the sacrifice of His creatures ; not by the shedding of human blood, will the One True God reconcile the world unto Himself. He is not a God whose fury must be appeased, whose favour may be purchased. The God of heaven and earth is a *loving* God, and by the sacrifice of *Himself* He will reconcile fallen man to his Creator. Peace, then, on earth—good will to men ; and glory—from angels first, and then from all His ransomed hosts—glory to God in the highest !

What a change, from the ancient days of Druidism to the age of Christianity ! Have we not, then, in looking on our Mistletoe-Bough, abundant reason for thankfulness to Him who has caused “a Light to spring up in a dark place,” and has brought our beloved country out of “the shadow of death” into the “glorious liberty” of His gospel ? And while we rightly exclude the mistletoe from our churches, as a reminder of heathen idolatry and superstition, we do well to give it place among our home decorations, as a venerable symbol of rejoicing, and a fitting memorial of the goodness which has been extended to our land.

And if, beside these graver thoughts, there came lighter, brighter memories—remembrances which we acknowledge as romantic, and yet fondly cherish—this also is not strange. For what marvel if the Mistletoe-Bough should diffuse romantic thoughts, when it is itself the very Offspring of Romance ?

The Druids, when they found it growing on their Sacred Tree, believed the plant to have come direct from Heaven : and to the ancients generally its origin was scarcely less mysterious, for they affirmed it to be bred from seeds which had first passed through the processes of digestion in the stomach of a ring-dove or a thrush.

And in our day this tale is only thus far reduced : the Mistletoe is propagated by the missel-thrush, who feeds upon its berries ; a part of the seed, clinging to the beak of the bird, is wetted off upon the trunk of a tree, and, where the wood is soft, readily takes root, adhering the most easily to smooth-rinded trees, such as the apple or the ash.

If the account thus given has gained in truth, it has surely scarcely lost in romance ; and mystery, that boundless treasure-store for romantic minds, may still encircle one Christmas bough, and claim for the Mistletoe a distinguished place among our old-year memories.

FRANCES HILDYARD.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE."

A Story Re-told.

IT was the strangest and most beautiful sight in the world—certainly the most beautiful they had ever seen or dreamt of ; and the party, after surmounting the perils of the ascent, stood gazing in astonished admiration. The Falls of Niagara may be very grand, observed they ; not that they could speak from experience, never having crossed the Atlantic to view them ; the sight of the Pyramids of Egypt worth a pilgrimage thither, and all the other known wonders of the earth, natural and artificial, equally imposing and sublime : but it was scarcely to be conceived that any one of them could vie in beauty with the Glaciers of Switzerland.

The party, some half-dozen in number, and of the English nation, had arrived at Chamouni in the night, later by some hours than they ought to have done, owing to the break-down of their char-a-banc just after they had quitted St. Martin : a quiet little village, whence the view of Mont Blanc is splendid in the extreme.

They were weary with travelling, and sought their beds at once : the earliest riser amongst them, John Rayner—and he not until the sun was up—rushing to his window, in the morning, before his eyes were half open, to see if any view was to be obtained.

He pulled aside the curtain, and stood transfixed ; regardless of the glances that might be attracted upwards by the unusual apparition of a gentleman exhibiting himself at the open window in his costume de nuit, his tasseled nightcap stretching a yard into the air. But John Rayner was a man much accustomed to act upon impulse : and it is possible that in this instance the scene he beheld excused it.

The Glacier de Bosson was before him—the large, unbroken Glacier de Bosson—with its colour of bright azure, and its shining peaks of gold, rising to a sky more deeply blue than we ever see it in England, glittering along as far as the eye could reach. A glimpse of the Mer de Glace was caught in the distance, its white surface presenting a contrast to the blue of the glaciers.

Mr. Rayner soon summoned his party ; and, after a hasty breakfast, they commenced preparations for a visit to the Mer de Glace. They were soon ready—considering that some of the party were ladies, and one of them a staid damsel of five-and-forty, methodical and slow ; another was a fair young bride, indulged in every wish and whim. The usual appendage of mules and guides accompanied them, and they

were a long while ascending the mountain—five hours at the least—but the ascent was sufficiently exciting, and to some minds sufficiently dangerous, to keep away ennui. The young girl, too, and indeed she was little more, was perpetually throwing them into a state of agitation with her sudden screams of terror; although the guides, with their Alpenstocks, seeing her fears, were more attentive to her than to all the rest put together. Once they thought she had certainly gone over, mule and all: it was when a descending party appeared almost right above their heads, and she was just at a broken and rugged corner, where there was scarcely room for one mule to step, without being precipitated into the depths below. But the danger was surmounted; and on they went, the mules nearly on end: for it is scarcely possible to conceive a more perpendicular ascent. Part of the way lay through groves of tall pine-trees; flowers and wild strawberries were growing around, and might be plucked at will.

But now they gained the height, and how strangely beautiful was the scene that broke upon them!—it certainly, as the gazers observed, could have no rival in nature. The day was one of the sunniest days, too, that ever rose on that picturesque land: had it been less fine, the greater part of the scene's beauty would probably have been lost.

The azure-tinted plains of ice, in their rugged sublimity, were stretched out broad and large, their surface glittering as if all sorts of precious stones were thrown there. The bright-green emerald, the pale sapphire, the gay amber, the purer topaz, the sweet-tinted amethyst, the richer garnet, the blue turquoise, the darker lapis lazuli, the rare jacinth, the elegant onyx, the delicate opal, the gaudy gold, and the brilliant diamond. All gay and glittering colours were there, presenting a dazzling profusion of tints such as the eye had never yet rested on. Pinnacles of snow rose up to the heavens: and frozen torrents, arrested mid-way in their course, hung over the waves of ice below. Plains, plains of ice were extended there, clear and transparent; masses of white shining snow in all fanciful shapes were crowded, as if they were rocks, one above another; and magnificent pinnacles, or aiguilles, as they are appropriately termed, rose their golden tops to the dark-blue sky, numbers of them upon numbers, as far away in the distance as the eye could reach. It is impossible to do justice in description to the exquisite colouring of these heaps or rocks of ice, between each of which yawned a fissure or abyss fearful to look down upon. You may have witnessed the blue of a southern sky, and the richer blue of the Rhone's waters—wondrously dark and rich as they roll on from Geneva's lake; you may have seen the bright blue plumage of rare birds, rivalling the exquisite tint that is known as ultramarine; but never, never have you imagined anything so lovely as the transparent azure of portions of these masses of ice.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Hamlet tells us, than are

dreamt of in our philosophy. It is very probable ; and there are certainly more places. When John Rayner's geographical master at school expounded to him the dreary, repellent attributes of the Icy Sea, making him shiver as he listened, he little thought there was *another* icy sea nearer home, one that he might sometime visit, and whose strangely magnificent beauty would cling to his recollections during all his future years.

The guides began pointing out to him some of the glistening peaks by name : the Aiguilles Rouges, the Col de Baume, the Grands Periades, the Grands Mulets, the Egralets, and others. And—strange, strange scene ! in the midst of this region of petrifaction, this enduring ice of ages, the green banks, verdant as our plains in the spring-time, lay on the edge of the white waters ; causing him to think of the blending of climes that he would never see blended—the smiling pastures of Arcadie in the midst of the desolation of the North Pole.

They gathered in a group close to the little châlet, as it is called, partaking of the refreshments that had been brought with them ; all save that pretty plaything, the young bride. She, her terrors subsided, sat twisting some wood-strawberries round her straw hat, much to the staining and detriment of its white ribbons, as John Rayner's staid aunt kept assuring her, when some fresh comers appeared upon the scene. They consisted of a lady and gentleman, a man-servant in undress livery, and some guides. The gentleman was young and remarkably handsome, aristocratic to the last degree, and there was an air of reserve and hauteur about him, conspicuous at the first glance. But he was forgotten when his companion, whom he had assisted from her mule and placed upon his arm, turned her countenance to their view. Seldom has a human face been formed so classically faultless ; and though there was not the slightest colouring in her features, the delicate beauty of their form was such, that, could a painter have transferred them to canvas, he would need to toil for fame no more. Her hair was of the deepest shade, next to black, and her eyes were blue. But such a blue ! dark and lovely as were the edges of the masses of ice she was looking at. They did not advance towards our party, preferring, no doubt, to shroud themselves in their habits of reserve (as one of the said party remarked), and keep themselves aloof from promiscuous travellers. Once she withdrew her arm from his, and began slipping about on the waves of ice, trying hard to climb them ; and, as she thus amused herself, he strolled away and approached nearer the other party. But he took no notice of it, save one or two involuntary glances of admiration which shot from his eyes as they fell upon the fair young wife before mentioned, who still sat weaving her strawberries ; not quite consistent, as John Rayner's maiden aunt stiffly remarked, with his devotion to *his* young wife down there.

"I wonder if they are English ?" quoth Miss Rayner—the first

"wonder" an Englishwoman expresses, and that invariably, when strangers appear in sight in a foreign land.

"English! of course not!" retorted John's wife, pushing up the wreath to see how many stains she could count upon her hat; and who, since she crossed the Channel, had been pleased to express a mania for everybody and everything that was foreign.

But the day at length wore away, with its pleasure, toil, and excitement; and not sorry were the Rayner party, after their perpendicular descent, to find themselves safe in the inn at Chamouni.

Early the next morning they went out to visit the source of the Arveyron; but it calls for little notice here, and its description would scarcely be read after that of the Icy Sea. They were standing by the grove of pines that skirts the rivulet, bargaining with some little children for the minerals they so anxiously displayed, when the same couple they had seen the day before amidst the glaciers advanced towards them; but this time quite unattended. The gentleman was attired in a sort of shooting coat, his tall slender form appearing to advantage in it; and the young lady was enveloped in a cashmere, her lovely features colourless as ever. But she hastily shook her veil over them as she neared the strangers.

They had scarcely passed, when the gentleman, in drawing something from his pocket—a sketch-book it looked like—let fall a gold pencil-case. Probably it was unperceived by him, and he continued his way, the pencil-case rolling to the feet of John Rayner. John picked it up; and, stepping after the stranger, returned it to his hand.

The stranger proffered his thanks politely and very courteously. There was something extremely prepossessing in his manner when he spoke; and in his smile also, in spite of the hauteur visible in his features when they were at rest.

"He is an Englishman, then!" cried John's good aunt, who had been watching and listening.

"And a nobleman to boot," added John.

On the blood-red stone of the chased pencil-case was engraved an elaborate coat of arms, surmounted by a viscount's coronet.

During their quiet journey back to St. Martin, in the char-à-banc, they, having nothing better to do, began discussing the episode, as John Rayner himself named it. Miss Rayner, who, many years before, had owned a real countess for a godmother, and still boasted of a cousin—she did not say how many degrees removed—in an ambassador's wife, had, as a matter of course, all the peerage at her fingers' ends, and knew the names and ages of everybody in it, as well as she did the Church Catechism. So she began speculating upon which of the peers' sons it was, and trying to recollect who amongst them had recently wedded.

"I have it!" she cried at last. "It is Lord L——. He was married

just before we left England—to that old admiral's daughter, you know, John, with the wooden leg ; he is something at the Admiralty. An exceedingly fine young man is Viscount L——, but so was his father before him, though I dare say he is altered now. He stood for our county in early life, and I saw him ride round the town the day of his election."

"My good madam," interrupted a gentleman, leaning down from his seat by the driver to speak, "the man we saw this morning is just as much like Lord L—— as you are like me. He is a regular dwarf, is L—— ; stands five feet one in his boots."

"How do *you* know Lord L——?" snappishly demanded the lady, vexed at finding herself, with all her aristocratic lore, at fault.

"I was at Oxford with him," was the reply, as the speaker threw away the end of his cigar.

"It is useless to discuss the matter further," observed John Rayner. "We have seen the last of them, and the prospect here is worth all the viscounts in Europe."

They were leaving the Glacier de Bosson, with its form of grace, and its colour of brilliant blue shading itself off above to snowy whiteness ; but shining cataracts, silvery and beautiful, were rushing down from the heights, amidst the trees, the rocks, and the green, green banks. And further on, as the char-à-banc continued its way out of the valley, the snowy range of mountains appeared, their outline sharply cut against the clear summer sky, the pinnacles, domes, and obelisks, as they might be fancied, shooting up to it ; and Mont Blanc—Mont Blanc so splendidly radiant seen from thence, standing forth in all its glory.

II.

It may have been several months prior to the date of events recorded above, that a family party had gathered one evening in the drawing-room of a handsome house, in one of the mid-London squares. What is being related took place, as may be gathered, many years ago ; and at that period the square was much inhabited by lawyers. Barristers also lived there.

A lady of advancing years sat in an easy chair ; the worsted-work with which she had been occupied was thrown aside, and she had placed her hand fondly upon the head of a young girl, who knelt before the recently-lighted fire to enjoy its blaze, for the autumn evenings were growing chilly. A stranger would have been struck at once with the girl's beauty. Had a masterly hand sculptured her features from marble, they could not have been more exquisitely moulded, and they were pale as the purest ivory. She seemed to be about eighteen, and a cherished, petted child.

Two ladies, each considerably more than thirty years of age, sat also

in the drawing-room. They were quiet-looking women, dressed with a plainness which formed a contrast to the elegant attire of the girl. One sat before her desk; the other—having drawn close to the window, for she was near-sighted—sat reading attentively.

"Louisa, my dear," observed the mother, removing her hand from her youngest daughter's head to look across the room, "I think you should put your writing aside: it is getting too late to see."

"In a few minutes, mother: my epistle is just finished, and I wish to send it by to-night's post."

"Is it for the convent?" inquired the girl, half turning round from the fire.

"It is, Frances."

"As a matter of certainty," rejoined the young girl; a saucy smile—in which might be traced a dash of derision—illuminating her features.

The expression was observed, and a deep sigh broke from the writer. Frances was so reprehensively light—and was encouraged in it!

A servant came in with a note on a silver waiter, handing it to his mistress. Frances, spoiled child that she was, leaned her head upon her mother's knee to look up at the hand-writing.

"It is from your papa, my dearest, written from the office; but a couple of lines. He says he shall bring home a client to dinner—a nobleman's son, who will probably take a bed at our house. It may be as well, perhaps, to order some trifling additions to the table."

"The dinner is very well, madam," meekly observed one of her elder daughters. "It is handsome and good: will not the enlarging of it savour much of worldly vanity?"

"Additions! to be sure, mamma!" cried Frances, pulling the bell. "What are you dreaming of, Mary?—it is a nobleman who is coming. You would think eggs and parsley handsome,"—with a fling at the fare of the convent, that she was rather fond of making game of. "It is getting time to dress."

Mr. Hildyard was an eminent lawyer, ranking high in his profession, of unblemished character, and of great wealth. He was a gentleman of the old school, and of the Roman Catholic persuasion. His family consisted but of these three daughters. The two elder ones, Louisa and Mary, had been brought up in a convent; one of the strictest order in England. When they came out of it, women grown, they were far more fitted for its retired life than for the active duties of this bustling world. They were very good, very religious—but very bigoted. Seeing all things with the narrow-minded views that a long residence in a cloister necessarily imparts, the world with its daily doings was to them nothing less than a sin: and the most lamentable sin of it all was the way in which their young sister Frances was being reared; rendering her vain, idle, self-willed and self-indulgent. Her dresses alone, with

their lace and their flounces, their gay colours and their costly fabrics, were in themselves a little sin in the sight of these elder and sober women ; the evening entertainments at which Frances appeared, at home or out, were worse. The child had no more religion in her, or reverence for religion, than a young Hottentot ; and the sisters prayed day and night on their knees for her conversion.

For, though excellent people in a moral point of view, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Hildyard could be called actively or passively religious. He was completely absorbed in his profession ; she in social pleasures and in the care of Frances. Most passionately fond of this child, coming to them so many years after the birth of the others, were Mr. and Mrs. Hildyard ; and, like too many fond parents, they merged her future well-being in present indulgence. Oh ! better had it been for Frances Hildyard to have subdued to marble her heart's best feelings, and to have lived a life of contented gloom, as her sisters did, than to have grown up the vain, self-willed girl which she had done, revelling in the world and its vanities as if it were to be her resting-place for ever !

It is impossible to tell you how Frances Hildyard was idolised—how indulged. This is no ideal story, and I speak but of things as they were. When only seven years of age, she dined at table with her parents, at their late dinner-hour. Her will was law in the house ; the very servants, taking their tone from their superiors, made her their idol, or professed to do so. The most insidious flatteries were poured into her ear, and every hour in the day one eagerly drunk-in theme was whispered there—the beauty of Miss Frances. This indulgence, coupled with that fostered vanity, brought forth its fruits—and can you wonder at it ? Good seeds were in her heart,—good, holy seeds, planted in it by God, as they are in the heart of all ; but, in lieu of being carefully fostered and pruned, they were let run to waste, and the baneful weeds overgrew them.

A governess was provided for her, a kind, judicious Catholic woman. Send Frances to the convent, indeed ! What object would Mr. and Mrs. Hildyard have had to date upon had their precious child been removed from their sight ? Mrs. Mainwaring was anxious for the welfare of her charge, and to do her duty ; but Frances was the most rebellious pupil. The governess appealed to the mother ; and Mrs. Hildyard, with showers of kisses and presents, implored Frances to be more attentive ; but Frances heard her whisper to the governess not to be harsh with her darling child. It was a continual scene of struggle for mastery : and Mrs. Mainwaring threw up her engagement. A French lady was procured in her place, who had the accommodation, to use no more reprehensible term, to assimilate her views to those of Miss Frances. And so she grew up ; her extreme beauty palliating to the household all her little wilful faults, and the admiration she excited filling the very crevices of her heart. To hear the echo of the word “beautiful”

coupled with Frances Hildyard was of itself, to her, worth living for. But soon one was to come, for whose admiration she would alone care, one for whose step she would learn to listen, and in whose absence existence would be a blank.

Meanwhile, during all these years, an under-current of warfare had existed between Frances and her sisters. It was sure to be so. They opposed little checks to her in all ways, or strove to do it; to her visiting, to her gay attire, to her pride and wilfulness; honestly praying to be guided in doing it, and believing that the mission had been given to them to save her soul. Frances, never before thwarted in her life, was outrageously indignant; and, just to spite them, made herself out to be worse—that is, to have less religion—than she really was. Mary, the second daughter, nearly gave up the contest in sheer despair; Louisa would never give it up but with life. They both loved Frances dearly, and were acting, as they sincerely thought, for her best welfare.

And now we will return to this evening. First of all premising that a long and painful illness had so prostrated Mrs. Hildyard some months before, that she was yet very delicate: consequently the house was kept quiet, and Frances was not going out much.

Frances was the first to enter the drawing-room. Mr. Hildyard was standing before the fire with a gentleman. They both moved as she advanced, and her father, taking her hand, said, "My love, allow me to introduce Lord Winchester. Your lordship sees my youngest daughter, Miss Frances Hildyard."

She saw that he was young, handsome, noble,—she saw that he was courteous beyond any man she had hitherto formed acquaintance with: but she saw not the whole of his fascinations then.

He led Mrs. Hildyard in to dinner, and sat next to her; Frances was on his other hand. The two elder sisters, in their quiet grey silk gowns, sat opposite, and Mr. Hildyard occupied his customary place at the foot of the table. In her white dress and golden ornaments, Frances presented a contrast to her sisters.

Vain girl! She was looking her very best, and she tried to look it. She was conscious that Lord Winchester regarded her with no common admiration. She was used to that; but she was *not* used to this homage from a nobleman.

The secret of his visit was made known later to the family—to no one else. Viscount Winchester, but following the example set him by many another noble viscount, had got himself into a scrape: plainly speaking, he had run headlong into debt, and into the hands of the money-lenders. The respectable old Earl his father, shocked and astonished, had, in the first flush of anger, refused to assist him; and the viscount, threatened with arrest, and not daring to apply to the family solicitor, had flown to Mr. Hildyard, of whom he had some knowledge

Matters could not be arranged in a day. No, nor in a week. They gave more trouble, and were likely to give more, than Mr. Hildyard had anticipated. Meanwhile it was not safe for Lord Winchester to show himself abroad. So here he was located, *en famille*, in the lawyer's house; and upon Frances chiefly devolved the task of entertaining him.

The old Earl relented, and Lord Winchester was a free man again. He and Frances had become very friendly with each other; it is too early yet to say attached—but the seeds for that were sown. He quitted the house, but not to remain absent from it for ever—now a morning visit was paid, now a friendly dinner taken with them. Neither did it seem anything but a natural occurrence that he should frequently return to his friends, from whom he had received so much kindness. But it needed not his whisperings to Frances, to convince her that she was the magnet that drew him thither, for she saw it in every look, and traced it in every action.

III.

THE winter had come. Frost and snow lay chillingly upon the ground, when one afternoon the visiting carriage of Mrs. Hildyard drew up to her house, and Frances, followed by her mother, leaped lightly out of it. A radiant smile of happiness was on her beautiful face, for a well-known private cab was waiting at the door, giving sure token that its owner was within.

Lord Winchester's visits had been frequent and constant; and oh, the change that had come over the feelings of Frances Hildyard—over her whole life! She had learnt to love; but few could imagine how wildly and passionately.

There he was, as she entered the morning room, striding up and down it impatiently. A hasty greeting, while they were yet uninterrupted, and Lord Winchester walked forward to shake hands with Mrs. Hildyard.

"So, Frances," he whispered, when an opportunity offered, and others were in the room to draw attention from them, "you are tiring already of your conquest?"

Tiring of him! A faint blush upon her pure cheek, and a look of inquiry formed her only answer.

"It was unkind not to reply to my note, when I so earnestly urged it."

"What note?" she asked.

"The one I sent you yesterday."

"I had no letter from you yesterday."

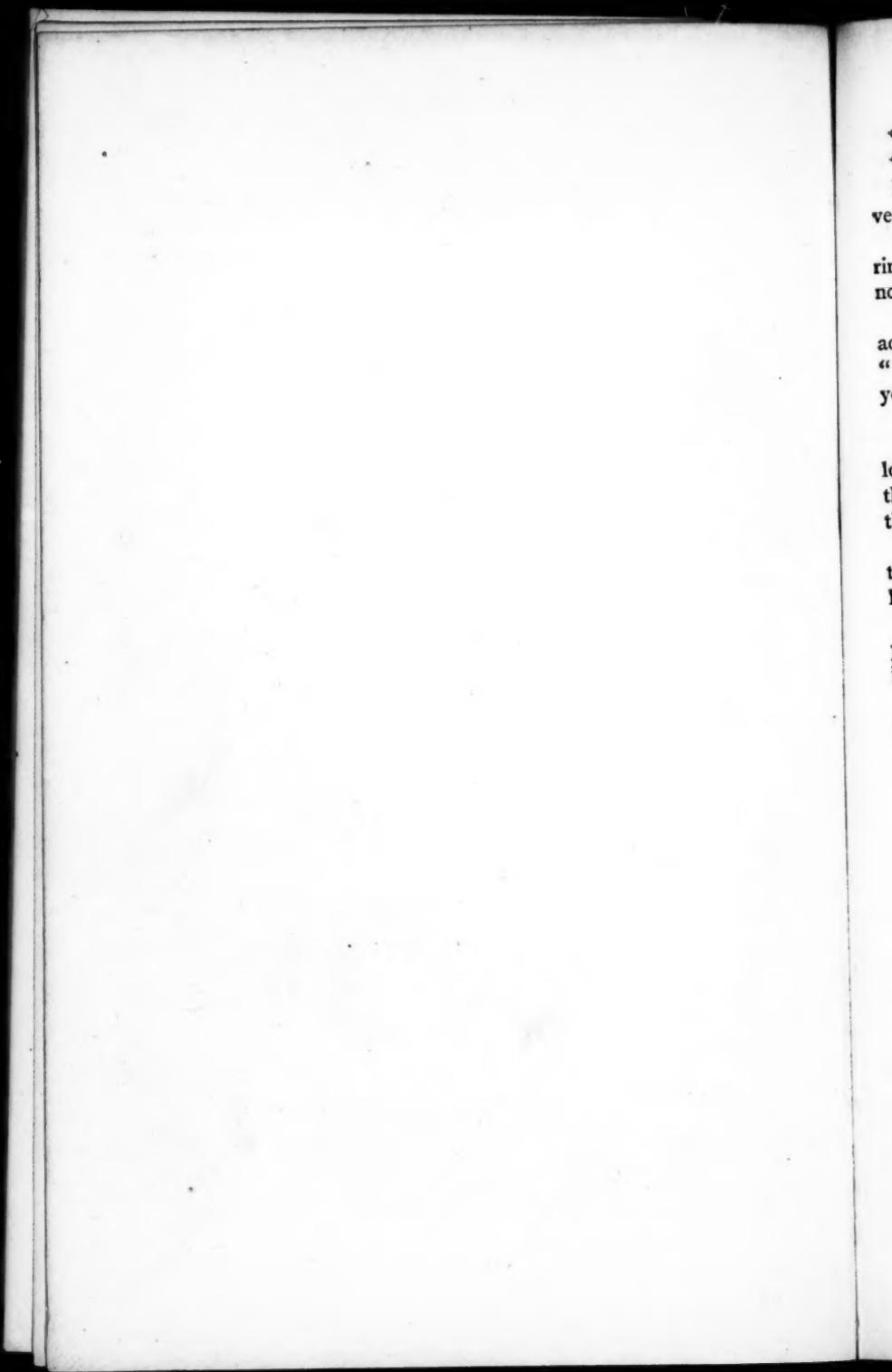
"Think again, my love. James tells me he delivered it as usual into the hands of your own maid."



M. ELLEN EDWARDS.

J. SWAIN.

AT CHAMOUNI.



"Then she never gave it me," answered Frances, earnestly.

"Some negligence!" ejaculated Lord Winchester.

But the visitors who had been present were leaving, and their conversation was interrupted.

As soon as she was at liberty, Frances hastened to her room, and ringing for her maid, a chattering French girl, demanded if she had not received a note for her on the previous day.

"Most certainly," answered the girl, jabbering on with her false accent, and occasionally introducing a word of her native language. "It came when you were out, mademoiselle, and I placed it here on your toilette-table."

"Then where is it?" inquired Frances.

"Mais—I suppose you had it, mademoiselle," replied the attendant, looking puzzled; and she was beginning to scan the ground, as if thinking it might have fallen there, when Miss Louisa Hildyard entered the apartment, and, of her own accord, dismissed the servant.

"I—I took the liberty, Frances," began Miss Hildyard, clearing her throat, and speaking in the mild, monotonous manner which distinguished her and her sister, "to open a letter yesterday which was addressed to you."

The thoughts of Frances reverted to the lost note, and the impetuous flush of anger rose to her brow. Her answer was delivered in a tone of the utmost astonishment.

"You—opened—a—letter—addressed—to—me!" was her exclamation, with a pause between every word.

"I did," meekly replied Miss Louisa.

"And you presumed—was it from here? Did you find it here?" reiterated Frances, pointing to the dressing-table.

"It was—I did," responded the elder lady, scarcely above a whisper, "and I am now come to converse —"

But Frances overwhelmed her words with a perfect torrent of indignation. "And how could you—how dared you break the seal of a letter which bore my address?—how dare you presume to stand in my presence and assert it?"

"The superscription was in Viscount Winchester's hand-writing, and the seal bore his crest," was the placid reply. "A sufficient warranty for my proceeding, for I had suspected there was some private understanding between you and him, and deemed it my duty to look into it."

"And don't you know," exclaimed Frances, stamping her foot in her passion, "that the act you have been guilty of is so vile, that, until lately, one committing it was deemed worthy of a felon's death upon the scaffold? That degradation so utter can have been committed by my father's child!"

"This storm of passion and violence is very bad," deplored Miss Louisa Hildyard, crossing her hands upon her chest. "May your mind be brought to habitual meekness!"

"May you be brought to a sense of the shameful act you have stooped to, and keep out of my room for the future!" retorted the exasperated girl; who, truth to say, was looked upon as little better than a heathen by her sisters.

Miss Louisa sighed. "I am but anxious for your best interests, Frances."

"Be so good as attend to your own, and quit my room," said Frances. "And I must request you to return to my maid, whom I will send after you, the letter you have robbed me of."

"It is no longer in my possession," said Miss Louisa, coolly taking a seat, as if in open defiance of her sister's imperious command. "I am in the habit of consulting Sister Mildred, my dear old preceptress at the convent, upon all points, and I submitted Lord Winchester's communication to her by last night's post. Had Viscount Winchester ——"

Frances turned wild. "Had Viscount Winchester come with his future coronet in hand, and laid it at your feet," she vehemently interrupted, "you would have jumped at the offer, unsuitable as you are to him in years. We should have had no covert appeals to Sister Mildred and the convent then."

"Oh, that you had been reared amid the sisterhood!" exclaimed Miss Hildyard. "You would have learnt better than to enter on a clandestine correspondence."

"I wish the sisterhood had been in the sea before they had taught you the trick of opening letters," retorted the young lady, who was in too great a passion to care what heterodox things she gave utterance to. "Why don't you attend to your own pleasures—your week-day masses, and your sick-visitations, and your saintly embroideries, and leave other people alone?"

For the two elder ladies, who were really estimable, and striving to do good in the world, though perhaps rather bigoted and narrow-minded, were rarely seen without some work in their hands, destined for the ornamentation of the convent chapel.

"You know, Frances, that you could never marry Lord Winchester."

"I know that I shall not ask your consent to do it."

"Frances, it could never be. You might as well dream of marrying the—the—person down below, who is not an angel," continued Miss Louisa, striving to put the proposition genteelly, and tapping the floor with her foot, lest Frances should mistake her meaning. "You might as well marry *him*, as a man professing no religion, and reared a Protestant."

The pale face of Frances bore a tinge of red—always a sign in her of deep emotion. She liked not the turn the discussion was taking; for the difference in their creeds had seemed to her the one stumbling-block to her union with Lord Winchester.

"Have you increased my obligations to you, by informing papa that you are a breaker-open of other people's letters?"

"My lips are sealed upon the subject until the arrival of the answer of Sister Mildred," replied Miss Hildyard. "I shall be guided, as I ever am, by her advice."

IV.

THE answer of Sister Mildred was not long in coming. It was a voluminous epistle; pious exhortations and scraps of advice being mixed together. The result of it was, that Louisa held a private interview with her father.

Mr. and Mrs. Hildyard were sufficiently confounded with the unwelcome news made known to them. That they were taken with Lord Winchester, as a fascinating man and pleasing companion, could not be denied; but that their greatly-beloved daughter should have become attached to one of an opposite faith, was an overwhelming blow. They might be somewhat lax in observing the duties of their religion, but they were at least true to its tenets. Moreover, Mr. Hildyard had the sense to know that he was not high enough in society's scale for his daughter to be chosen as a wife by the Viscount Winchester. He told Louisa that her fears must have exaggerated the matter—and he thought they had.

But, that same evening, he was disagreeably undeceived. Upon entering the drawing-room after dinner, he found Lord Winchester there. Frances sat at the piano, and his lordship was leaning over her and speaking in whispers. Mrs. Hildyard had dozed off on the sofa; Miss Mary Hildyard sat at the table under the lamp, working at the everlasting embroidery. Altogether, what with the old lady's doze, and the younger one's pre-occupation, the lovers had it pretty much to themselves; and Mr. Hildyard walked across the well-carpeted room without being perceived, in time to see the Viscount touching his daughter's ringlets. Frances started up.

"What do you do, Frances, so far from the fire?" he cried with asperity; the first time in her life she ever remembered harsh tones used to her.

"Is it so cold a night?" inquired the young man.

"Very cold, my lord," was the short reply.

"This room is warm anywhere," observed Frances, as she slowly approached the table where her sister was sitting.

"Shall I sing you your favourite songs to-night, papa?" she inquired breaking a disagreeable silence.

"No. I am in no mood for singing."

"Will you give me my revenge at chess?" asked the Viscount of Mr. Hildyard.

"If your lordship will excuse me, I shall feel obliged."

So, with this chilling reception, of course his lordship soon went away : and then Mr. Hildyard spoke to Frances.

Kindly and cautiously he pointed out to her how impossible it was that she could ever marry Lord Winchester ; partly from the difference of creed, partly from that of position. It was the first objection he enlarged upon ; not the last : a proud man—and Mr. Hildyard was that—does not like to dwell on his own inferiority in any way. He told her to choose from the whole world—that he and her mother had but her happiness at heart ; but she must choose one of their own faith. “I hope,” he continued, “that a mistake has arisen upon this point, and that you do not love Lord Winchester—that it will be no pain to you not to see him again.”

Her heart beat tumultuously, and a film gathered before her eyes ; but she turned her face, with its agitation, away from view, and gave an evasive answer.

“Because to-morrow I shall write to him,” proceeded Mr. Hildyard, “that a stop may be put to this at once, and for ever.”

V.

ASTONISHED as Mr. and Mrs. Hildyard may have been, that was nothing compared with the indignant amazement of the Earl when the affair broke upon him. For Mr. Hildyard, not content with writing fully to Lord Winchester, had dropped an explanatory note to the Earl, intimating his hope that the latter would urge upon his son the futility of the expectation that Miss Frances Hildyard could ever become Viscountess Winchester.

That the Viscount admired Frances was beyond a doubt ; nay, that he loved her ; but that he had entertained any serious thoughts of making her his wife was a mistake. He was not so ready to give up the attractions of bachelorship. He had passed his leisure hours most agreeably by the side of Frances, without any ultimate end in view, and without giving a thought to one. And none could be more sensible than he of the fact that between himself and Miss Frances Hildyard lay a great social gulf. As to any difficulty on the score of religion, he saw it not. Were Miss Frances Hildyard of the Turkish faith, it had been all one to him.

There was commotion in the house when the supercilious letter of the haughty old peer arrived at Mr. Hildyard’s. A lawyer’s daughter a fit mate for the heir to one of the most ancient earldoms ! Had Mr. Hildyard and his wife ever entertained so aspiring a thought, they were now plainly undeceived.

And the letter cruelly mortified Mr. Hildyard. After all he had done for the Viscount ! It was just possible that visions had floated in his mind of matters being amicably arranged, of the Viscount’s insisting on having her ; and he knew that unions between Catholics and

Protestants took place every day, and might take place now: but, with that letter before him! Mr. Hildyard crushed it in his fingers, and rose up, decision in his white and angry face.

All intercourse with Lord Winchester, even but a passing nod, should they meet in public, was interdicted; and Frances, who had never been chidden or crossed, who did not know what control was, had her mother and sisters constantly watching her, night and day.

But their vigilance was sometimes eluded. There were servants in the house who, devoted to Frances's interests or to the Viscount's bribery, frequently passed letters from one to the other, and even contrived to bring about interviews. One unlucky evening, however, that Frances was missing from the sitting-room, her eldest sister went in search of her—suspicion, it may have been, rife in her heart.

Reception-rooms were searched in vain, and she went down to those of the servants, scaring one she met on the road by her unusual appearance there. The housekeeper's parlour was at the end of a passage, and Miss Hildyard advanced to it, turned the handle of the door, and—she did not faint, but sank down upon a chair with a groan. There stood Lord Winchester and Frances; his lordship's arm round her waist, and his lips stealing a kiss from her pretty cheek.

Poor Miss Louisa, modest and retiring, had never in all her life received such a shock. It was enough to turn her hair grey. These things had never been so much as heard of in the convent. She thought the world must be coming to an end.

But Lord Winchester, instead of sinking through the floor with contrition, appeared nowise daunted. He raised his head proudly up, and placing Frances's hand within his arm, demanded of Miss Louisa if she had any commands for him.

This hardihood put the finishing stroke upon Miss Louisa's agitation. She fell into hysterics, and the housekeeper came running in. Amid the confusion Lord Winchester withdrew.

But the scene next day was terrible. The stealthy intrusion, not the first, into his house, the letters which had passed—for the servants were made to confess—quite terrified Mr. Hildyard. Coupled with the fact that Lord Winchester apparently was not seeking Frances for a wife, it gave him a kind of nameless terror. He had Frances before him, his wife and eldest daughter being present.

"Will you," he cried to Frances, after an hour spent in fruitless discussion and recrimination, "will you, or will you not, give up this man?"

"Papa, I cannot," she murmured.

"Frances, do you remember how I and your mother—there she stands—have cherished you? Do you know that you are entwined round our hearts as never child was yet entwined? Will you outrage this affection of years for the sake of a stranger—and he one who is not worthy of you?"

Ah ! Mr. and Mrs. Hildyard, you now see the effects of your wofully indulgent training. What response does Frances make ? Why, she turns away her head, and makes none.

"Frances, for the last time," continued her father, "will you undertake to renounce all friendship with Viscount Winchester—that he shall be to you henceforth as if you had never met ?"

The faint crimson shone in her cheek, and her voice and hands trembled ; but she only whispered more firmly the former answer.

"I will never promise it."

But one course lay open, as it appeared to them in their distress—and they took a trusty friend into conclave, as well as the family confessor ; a fatherly old man, not often troubled, it must be owned, by the family, except by the two elder daughters of it—one course by which Frances might be saved : that of sending her to the convent. Placed there for a term, she would no doubt be brought to see the error of her wilful ways.

Mrs. Hildyard started at the first shock of the proposition ; Mr. Hildyard passed his hand across his brow, as if pain had settled there. They both knew how unfit Frances was for the seclusion and monotony of a convent ; how grievously the discipline would try her : and oh, how they loved her still !

But the emotion passed in silence, neither speaking to enter an objection ; for in truth they could devise no better mode of dealing with the difficulty. Frances braved it out in her spirit of rebellion. Better be in a convent, she said, than watched at home every moment of the day and night.

But a few days, and she was there. A friend took charge of her, and they travelled post. It was evening when the carriage drew up at the gates. Frances descended from it, and was led through one courtyard after another into the building—which struck her even then with its gloom. Then the doors closed with a bang ; and Frances Hildyard was shut out from the world she had so idolised.

PART THE SECOND.

I.

POUR ! pour ! pour !—Stream ! stream ! stream !—Hail, rain, snow, wind !—Shake, shiver, drip !—ugh ! ogh ! igh !

And amidst such a storm as he never hoped to be out in again, did John Rayner, in company with some other diligence passengers, find or swim his way into Lausanne, the diligence itself having been upset and disabled half a mile off. He sought shelter, carpet-bag in hand, in a comfortable-looking, retired hosterie, where the host attended upon his guests himself, or sent his wife to do so when he was busy.

"A good roaring fire, and a stiff glass of cognac and water, madame," quoth John; "we will talk about dinner afterwards." And, stretching out his legs to the blaze, and sipping the cordial, he speedily regained his equanimity of temper.

What he was doing again in Switzerland, and what took him to Lausanne, is no business of ours. The object of his journey was widely different from that of the agreeable tour of pleasure when he visited the Glacier de Bosson eighteen months before. He was now travelling alone, and expected to be located for two or three weeks at Lausanne—beautiful Lausanne in summer, but a most dreary place in winter.

There was no table-d'hôte in the inn, and he left the dinner to them. It was nicely cooked, and served by the hostess.

"You shall have some creams to-morrow, sir," she observed, placing the dessert. "I could not manage it to-day, for the saints know I have had my share of occupation from sunrise this morning. It is no light matter, sir, to lose a pair of hands in the work of a house."

"You have not lost yours," cried John, looking at those of his hostess.

"But I have lost my daughter's, sir. We have a sick lady stopping in the house, and she has been so much worse the last day or two, that my daughter sits upstairs with her. It is a sad thing to be stricken down with illness in a foreign country, without a friend near."

"It is, indeed," replied the guest. "I trust it will never be your case or mine."

"And she is so beautiful! But the English women mostly are."

"Is it a countrywoman of mine you have been talking of?" he inquired, aroused to sympathy.

"I thought I had said so," answered the hostess. "She was ill when she came, about three weeks ago, and she has been getting worse ever since. Two days past a great change took place; yet, in spite of all we can say or do, she will not see a doctor."

The landlady left the room, and John Rayner sipped his cognac, musing on what he had just heard. Before much time had elapsed, however, back she came; and, drawing forward the chair on the opposite side of the fire, ensconced her portly person in it, with that unconscious familiarity observable on the Continent, and which conveys anything but an idea of presumption or disrespect, as it would be too apt to do in England. Down she sat, with a "Pardon, monsieur," and a stroking and smoothing of her white apron.

"I am taking a great liberty, sir, but I have been conning the matter over with my husband, and we have come to the resolution of asking you to see this sick lady. It would be a terrible thing if she were to die in the house, and without advice, which she *will not* have. We might have the authorities down upon us."

"Very true," answered John, not exactly seeing what the affair had to do with him. "What is her objection to seeing a medical man?"

"What indeed!" grumbled the landlady; "I should like to know what myself. She says she has no need of one, while all the time she is as ill as she can be to be alive. Though young, I should say that she has seen much sorrow.

"What is her name?" inquired John Rayner.

"Madame Eef."

"Madame what?" repeated John.

"Eef," returned the landlady. "It is an English name, that."

"He tried to twist the "Eef" into shape, and could not. Knowing the astounding metamorphosis our names undergo in a French mouth, he let the matter drop.

"Will you not see her, sir, and persuade her to consult a physician? She may listen to you, being an Englishman. I can take you into her room without consulting her, and ——"

"But you surely don't think I could intrude myself into any lady's chamber without her permission?"

"Eh, mercy me!" cried the dame, "then I don't see what's to be done. She must lie there and die."

"What *can* be done?"

"We thought, sir, you might have paid her a friendly visit, as a countryman, asking if you could render her any little service, hearing she was cast down by illness in a remote place. It would be but kindness at any rate."

"Suppose you were to inquire ——"

"It is of no use to inquire," interposed the landlady; "she is very reserved, and will not even hear talk of a stranger. Could you not, sir, say you were a doctor?"

"I am a doctor," interrupted her guest.

"In reality?" exclaimed the dame, looking up.

"In reality," nodded John. "A *bonâ fide* doctor, with all the et cæteras, and in good practice in my own land."

"Then, sir, you have no plea for refusal. Should you hear of her death in a few days, you will reflect upon yourself for permitting a young countrywoman, almost a girl, to die unaided and uncared for in a foreign inn."

And John Rayner yielded to her argument, and laid aside the cigar-case, which he was upon the point of opening, until after he had paid this strange visit.

The hostess retired, and presently her daughter came for him, requesting him to follow her up-stairs. Passing the bedroom which had been assigned to him, she preceded him down the corridor, and gently opening the door at the end of it, she beckoned to her mother, who was in the room, and retired.

It was a large dreary-looking chamber, dimly lighted by a single candle and the flickering flames of the wood fire. A sofa, covered

with clean white calico, was drawn towards the blaze, and sitting leaning against its pillow was the invalid. He could not see very clearly at first—she looked young and fair, but deathly pale.

The landlady said a few words by way of introduction : they were probably not heard, for she did not look up. But the moment her ear caught the sound of strange footsteps, she turned and started wildly from her seat ;—gazing at him, her lips apart, her hands clasped together, and her bosom heaving.

In the dim light of the room, of a greater dimness where he stood in the shade, she may have mistaken him for another.

He began a short explanation—that he was an English medical man—but it was useless to continue any statement or explanation just then. Her whole frame was shaking, her chest and throat were throbbing : they could almost hear her heart beating.

Where had he seen her before—where *had* he seen that beautiful face ? For the moment he could not tell, but as he continued to look upon her, a dawning light stole through his mind—a confused reminiscence of this young lady before him, a proud and handsome Englishman, and the glaciers of Switzerland. Then he remembered the episode of the gold pencil-case, and wondered what brought her here alone.

Half an hour afterwards Mr. Rayner was quitting the room. He had made some slight progress ; at any rate she was calm, and did not insist upon his leaving her uncared for, as she had done at first. She had even not contradicted him when she heard him say he would see her at a convenient season in the morning.

"How do you find her, sir?" whispered the hostess, meeting him on the staircase.

"She is dying," was the answer. "In a week's time from this I question if she will be alive."

"Eh, mon Dieu !" cried Madame, with a sigh. "On l'a bien pensé."

"Will you direct me to a chemist's ?" he inquired.

"My boy, Guillaume, shall show you, sir. Quelle triste chose ! quel malheur pour nous ! quel malheur qu'elle s'est arrêtée ici !"

II.

THREE evenings afterwards, John Rayner sat by the side of the invalid in the dimly-lighted sick chamber, the one candle upon the table, and the red light shooting up from the wood fire. A wonderful bond of union, considering the short period of their acquaintanceship, had sprung up between them—it deserved the name of friendship, if ever that name was deserved on earth. He knew no more of her history than he knew the first hour he met her, yet he could have cherished and protected her through life ; and she could have clung to and confided in him. Not exactly with the feeling that lies between

brother and sister ; still less as a lover. A lover ! he had left his own sweet wife in his native country ; and *she*, this stranger, was too passionately attached to another, too entirely engrossed with his remembrance, to allow even the shadow of such a feeling to enter her imagination. Yet they had become dear friends ; and he could have laid her aching head upon his breast, and striven to soothe away her anguish.

Is it not strange that these feelings —. However, let all that pass.

"Are you acquainted," she suddenly asked, turning upon him for a moment her brilliantly blue eyes, though their brilliancy had now its origin in fever, "with the London Inns of Court?"

"Quite well."

"Then you may know the legal firm of Hildyard and Prael ?"

"Who does not ? Their names are eminent."

"Mr. Hildyard is my father," she whispered, bending down her head on the arm of the sofa, so that he could not see her face.

"Mr. Hildyard !"

"Even so. I was—I am Miss Hildyard."

Yet the wedding-ring and keeper were on her finger. False, deceiving rings !—false, deceptive, worthless baubles ! She saw his involuntary glance at them, and her head was bent lower. And John Rayner, for that rebellious glance, could almost have bandaged his eyes. Whatever may have been her errors, it was not in his duty, no, nor in his nature, to chastise her for them.

"I know Mr. Hildyard slightly," he resumed.

"Have you met him lately?—how does he seem ?—when did you last see him ?" she reiterated, looking up with painful earnestness.

And then the doctor recalled a fact which had escaped his memory, and he felt the hot blood rush to his face. Mr. Hildyard was dead : he had died about six months before. Should he tell her ? No.

He relinquished the hand which he had taken, and rose hastily to snuff the candle, for her eyes were still raised to his face, and the tell-tale colour was there.

"What dreadful snuffers these are ! If they would but import a few English ones into these remote places !"

"But my father ?" she interrupted, beseechingly.

"I am trying to recollect," he replied, with apparent indifference, as he resumed his place. "I do not think I have seen Mr. Hildyard lately. But I am not much in the habit of seeing him ; my residence is in so different a part of the town : as I have told you."

"My dear, dear father !" she uttered. "What would I not give to see him once again !"

Quietly and persuasively John Rayner got her to speak of her past life. There was full confidence between them now. The act of placing her in the convent was a terrible trial to her, even yet. Or, rather, its reminiscence.

"I cannot describe what it was to me," panted Frances, emotion stirring her; and her breath was laboured and heavy, as is often the case with one drawing near the grave. "I had been reared in the luxuries of life, accustomed to its elegances and gaieties, and they tore all from me and shut me up in a bare, gloomy prison. I could but compare it to a house of death. Do you suppose I felt the change?"

"A convent is represented to the uninitiated as a peaceful asylum," said John Rayner, thinking to soothe her.

"Peaceful asylum! there are some who give that name to the grave—they have no more tried the one than they have the other. I have experienced the former, I am close upon the latter; and I can only pray that there may be no analogy between them."

"Yet there are hundreds of women who voluntarily embrace the seclusion of a convent, and live and die in it?"

"Hundreds of girls; but for the women, could you count them by tens? And you call it willingly—you, with your keen penetration and your sound intellect. Well—yes," she added after a pause, "they do enter willingly for the most part; and they find out afterwards what they have done. When girls have been trained in a convent, then, I grant you, they may find pleasure in its peaceful monotony. Look at my two sisters"—with a flash of the old spirit. "What are they? little better than living mummies. They are just about as fit for the world as I was for the convent."

"They had been reared in one, and you in the other, you see."

"Just so. It all lies in the training. The convent has its good side of course, but I was not fitted for it. I was particularly *unfitted* for it; and the one of which I speak is, of all convents I ever heard of, the most strict and severe in its discipline and rules. I am not speaking against these religious orders generally, you understand," she added more quickly; "I should be untrue to my faith if I did; only, the change acted badly on *me*. Collectively, I revere them."

"Your friends placed you there with the best of views, I feel sure," said Mr Rayner. "That you might acquire peace and resignation."

"True. But they made a wide mistake. Unfortunately for their views, perhaps also for me, I was too firmly wedded to the world's ties."

"And therefore the monotony was irksome."

"That is not the right word: it implies something that may be borne. Things in themselves were not so very terrible: only they appeared so to me. Many a girl might have got along: but not one reared as I had been. Think what it was! Torn from a London life of gaiety, from a whirl of pleasure, at home and out, in which my very heart was wrapt, which was to me as a very Paradise; torn suddenly from all this, and flung into what seemed to me a living tomb. Heaven forgive me! I know I think of it too harshly—that I was too rebellious then."

"It must have been a bitter trial for you," he murmured.

"One great, vast trial on the whole, and innumerable petty little trials intermixed. *They galled me most:* and of course you must see that my spirit was in a wickedly rebellious state. I suppose that is the true word for it—wicked. Every little cherished taste and prejudice of my past time was thwarted there. I was attired in the most simple manner when I went down—a plain black-silk dress and a white muslin collar; but these could not be allowed in the convent. They were taken from me before I had been ten minutes in the place; before they gave me any refreshment, or allowed me time to repose. A gown of black stuff or serge, looking just like some of the aprons worn by the inferior servants in my father's establishment, was brought to me by a nun. I was very obedient, and took off the silk dress as she required; but upon going to resume the collar—for I did not then know her interdiction extended to that—she raised a pair of scissors that hung at her girdle and deliberately cut it in two."

"'Then I am not to wear it?' I exclaimed.

"'It is a vain ornament,' she said, 'and may have no place here.'

"'And those in my boxes—are they to be served the same?'

"'Your boxes will be examined before they are given up to you,' was her reply, 'and all improper articles removed.'

"My high spirit rose within me; but I checked it, perhaps for the first time in my life. She desired me to take a seat, and proceeded to remove the combs from my hair. I started up then, and indignantly remonstrated. I thought she was about to cut it off.

"'Not so,' she answered, gathering the long curls in her hands, I am but going to arrange it in the mode permitted here.'

"I wish you could have seen me in this black coarse dress—coarse compared with what I had been accustomed to—fitting tightly to the shape, and closing high round the throat; not a bit of anything white lace, or embroidery, to be seen about me, and all my hair combed to the back of my head and tied up in a knot! But this was nothing; nay, I do think it was more a joke to me than anything else—a joke, mind you, if it had not been to last."

"But," exclaimed John Rayner, who had listened in astonishment, "I suppose you had entered as a boarder."

"I did enter as one."

"Then why this change in your attire?"

"You may well ask. It was Louisa's doing—my well-meaning, but most ill-judging eldest sister. I did not think so then: I know it now. My father and mother knew nothing of the dreadful discipline I was subjected to; I am sure of it; Louisa arranged it all. She wrote to the authorities in the convent and urged it upon them. I was to be almost as a nun. A nun! Fancy that, for a girl of the gay world."

"And your duties?"

"Do not talk of them," she answered; "they were to me intolerable

labour and privation. The sisterhood pursued them with monotonous contentment; inured to them by habit, they found their satisfaction in them: but I ——”

She appeared to be getting exhausted. John Rayner advanced to the table; and, pouring out some drops, administered them to her in water.

“The mornings, when I went there, were cold and dark,” she resumed, “and we had to rise without fire, and be in the chapel at five. At seven there was a scanty breakfast; at nine the chapel again; and after that we were dismissed to our cells to pray and meditate.”

“Neither of which was performed by you, I conclude?” cried John, taking her emaciated hand, and unconsciously twirling round and round those false rings.

“But they were. I meditated on my bitter fate; on my sister’s cruelty, for *she* knew what she was consigning me to, and by that time I had learnt to suspect it. I meditated upon how to escape. I yearned for home; I yearned for the world I had left behind; and, more than all, I yearned for the presence of one who had become more to me than home and friends. And when I prayed, as they ordered me, I prayed that I might be released from their unnatural trammels, or be removed by death.”

“But you were speaking of your duties.”

“Why go into the details?” she rejoined. “I dislike ever to think of them. One day was but a repetition of another, one hour almost the counterpart of the preceding one; the early rising, the continual prayers and services, and the self-same daily routine. We dined at twelve—such a dinner! I had used to wonder if the lady abbess had not a second one served in her own apartment. Herbs, vegetables, a small portion of meat, or fish, or an egg, and spring-water, may be good for the health, but I had been accustomed to more generous food. Afterwards came the chapel again, and then we had to appear before the lady abbess, *on our knees*, and give an account of our actions, dispositions, and thoughts during the past twenty-four hours. I must have tried her patience frequently; but that she was very kind to me, and endeavoured to win me over gently, I will not deny. A rebellious inmate was, I suppose, unknown in the convent; or, if any one rebelled in spirit, she perhaps concealed it better than I did. It peeped out in spite of me, and I was mildly and continually remonstrated with. I daresay the nuns, regarding themselves as travellers to Heaven, looked upon me as the sailors of old looked upon Jonah. If they could but have read the real rebellion that was searing my heart!”

“Shall I give you more drops?”

“Not now. For recreation we were allowed to do needlework; mending our own clothes, or working fine lace for the adornment of

the chapel. Work of all kinds I hated; I had never done any. There was no break to the painful monotony of my existence. I was not allowed to see the boarders. Whether the nuns thought I should infect them with my worldly spirit, or that they would wean my attention from religious exercises, I cannot say, but we did not meet. At eight o'clock in the evening we were consigned to our dark and lonely cells, and might go to bed or remain up, praying, as we chose. I frequently remained, not praying, but thinking of the scenes of gaiety I had used to enter about that hour—and that *he* was entering on them then—the lighted ball-rooms, the sweet music, the perfume of the flowers, and the radiant faces we were wont to meet. And, oh! the continual confessions! I who had nothing to confess but my painful regrets and the bitter feeling that was eating away my life! Can you imagine what it was for me?" she broke off to ask, in a tone of passionate pain.

"Only too well."

"I do not seek to excuse myself. I know how bitterly rebellious I was; that I did not even try to make the best of things: but I should like you to see that I was sinned against as well as sinning."

"Did you never write home?"

"Frequently. I am coming to that. I described minutely to my father and mother how I had to live; they would know better than words of mine could tell them that I was entirely unfitted for it. I humbled myself to them; I promised that if they would release me, and receive me at home again, I would be all they could wish. At length I offered to give up Lord Winchester; never to see or speak to him again; and they knew that, if I undertook this in all honour, I would have fulfilled it. I was suffering all this because I would not give that promise when they asked for it: for a promise once made by me is never broken."

"Did they relent?"

"I never had an answer. I wrote to my father, to my mother, to my sisters, but never did a single line or word come to me in return. I at last wrote, in the very extremity of despair, frequent, frequent letters; the lady abbess told me I wrote too often, and interdicted it."

"Were the letters sent?" inquired John Rayner.

"I cannot tell you; I do not know; but I had no suspicion then that they were not; otherwise—oh!" she broke off suddenly, pressing her hand upon her brow in anguish, "whoever played me false in this has much to answer for. It was one of two things: either the letters were not sent by Lousia's orders; or else they were all sent to her and she suppressed them. It was all, all her doing. The nuns, I am sure, were kind and good, but they no doubt had their orders from her—and they thought to save my soul. I did not suspect Lousia's treachery then. I thought my father and mother had abandoned me.

I thought I was consigned to that place for life ; and in my despair, I really prayed to die."

"Be calm, be calm, Miss Hildyard."

"I grew ill, and was removed to the infirmary, and—and—I cannot explain to you how, and you must never ask me, but I effected my escape from the convent."

He uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"You may well wonder. Such a thing had never, I believe, occurred there before, and probably never will occur again."

"But how could you effect it?"

"It was one of the inmates who assisted me, and for her sake my lips are sealed."

"Surely it was not a nun?"

"Oh, no. It was one who saw my despair and learnt to love and pity me. A tender-hearted woman; a helper in the domestic work of the convent, and who had helped to nurse me. There ! I have said too much."

"And you bribed her?"

"I had nothing to bribe with. The bribery was but genuine pity of her heart. She had a daughter once who died, and she loved me because she thought I resembled her. Still I do not think she would have ever aided me, had it not been that she feared ——"

"Go on, Miss Hildyard."

"I had paroxysms—dreadful paroxysms of despair, and I believe she feared I might lay violent hands upon myself. But I never should have done that, unless insanity had overtaken me. It was in the grey light of early morning that I escaped. I pointed to the world before me, and pressed *her* to fly with me ; but she shook her head, and said if I indeed thought I owed her a recompense, to offer up unceasing prayers that she might be forgiven for this act."

"What became of you ? Whither did you go ?"

The invalid flung her wasted hands over her face. "This is the most cruel confession to make of all," she whispered. "But—oh! don't blame me more than you can help. Remember that I thought home was, of all places, barred to me : that my appearance there would only lead to my being replaced in the convent under more astringent rules. I was helpless, foodless, almost clotheless ; my heart was nearly bursting with indignation and perplexity, and—I wrote to Lord Winchester."

There was a deep silence. John Rayner did not break it.

"I ran miles, it seemed to me, away from the convent, over cross-country roads : a few people that I met stared at me until all my limbs trembled with terror, for I feared they might divine who I was. I looked strange, no doubt, for I had only a shawl pinned over my head."

"But where did you find shelter?"

"I came suddenly upon a mill; I was in a retired lane, and the hedges had hid it from my view. Adjoining it was a cottage, and, seated on a bench at the door was a young woman, tossing and playing with a child. She gave me good-morrow kindly. I knew I could not go much further, and I was afraid of being pursued, so I mustered up resolution, and asked her to take me in."

"Did you say you came from the convent?"

"No, no. I told a tale of a cruel stepmother—I had been conning it over as I went along. I said I had run away from home, and wanted shelter somewhere for a day or two. She said she would afford it me; that the mill and cottage were so retired that sometimes a stranger would not be seen passing for weeks together, and that I could sleep with her and the baby, for her husband was gone to a distant cattle-show, and would not be back for three or four days. I wrote the letter that afternoon, and took it to the village myself in the dusk of the evening, and posted it."

"And he, to whom you wrote, came?" interposed John, in a low voice.

"He came. He prayed me to abandon those who had abandoned me, and to trust to his honour; and I left the cottage with him."

Again there was an unbroken pause, disturbed only by her irregular breathing, as she panted for respiration. John Rayner did not know what to say, or how to break it.

"Finish your recital another day," he whispered, as he leaned over her, and smoothed the pillows that were her support.

"I must finish it now," she answered, "if I am to finish it at all. I dare say you cannot think worse of me than you have already thought."

"I have never thought ill of you," he exclaimed, with his characteristic impetuosity. "I do not, I will not think ill of you; and were we both free —"

Whatever nonsense he was going to utter, I declare he does not choose to recall unto this day. But she interrupted him.

"Hear the rest while I have strength to tell it. We fled night and day, never halting for rest, and scarcely for refreshment, until we reached Paris. That same evening an English Catholic clergyman, in his canonicals, was introduced to the hotel, and went through the marriage ceremony."

"But, good heavens! my dear, dear young lady," ejaculated, Mr. Rayner, starting up and striding backwards and forwards across the room, "could you, with even your partial knowledge of the world—could you for a moment believe that such a marriage was a binding one?"

"I am but a few days, it may be hours, removed from the grave," she murmured, "and I will not go down to it with a falsehood on my lips—not even to purchase a tithe of good opinion from you. I felt

that the marriage might be a false one ; that perhaps it was not legally good : at least, as regarded him, a Protestant. Even now I am not quite sure, one way or the other. The Priest blundered at parts of the service : it has struck me since that possibly he was not a priest at all."

"There would have been time for you to retreat, even then."

"There would, there would. But I shoulJ have gone down then in the world's opinion. And you do not know what it is to feel that you are thrust from your father's home ; that you possess no refuge in the wide world, and to have one by your side persuading you to trust to him, one whom you worship almost to idolatry, as I did him. Besides, in spite of the latent doubt, I did believe in the marriage : sometimes I believe in it still. My imprudence was lamentable, my thoughtlessness great—yet do not shrink from me."

He drew her aching head towards him, and bathed her beating temples with cooling water.

"There is little more to tell that you may not imagine. We travelled rapidly through France, and lingered in Switzerland ; you saw us at the Glaciers. That was my happy time ; if I can say that one hour has been truly happy since I was sent out of my father's house."

A pause. The tears were coursing down her pale cheeks.

"We passed on to Italy in October," she resumed, "and remained there the winter. In the spring we returned to Switzerland, and lived in seclusion in one of those beautiful little villas on the border of Geneva's lake. We had travelled under the name of Heath, and I still retain it ; it did as well as any other—Mr. and Mrs. Heath."

The Madame Eef of the landlady was explained.

"And now commenced my punishment. He had long shown symptoms of ennui and indifference, and ere the green of the spring had well given place to the blossoms of summer, he left. It was but twelve months since the period of our marriage in Paris—and that was the duration of his vaunted love."

"Be calm, Miss Hildyard, for your own sake."

"He said he should return shortly. But I doubted him, and the terrible sickness of despair took hold of my heart. Let no one talk of man's faithlessness until they are deserted as I have been."

"Have you seen him since?"

"No—never. A few letters, affectionate at first, but growing gradually cold, as his love had done, are all the notice I had from him."

"You bore it in silence—you did not follow him ?"

"Do you think I would follow one who wilfully estranges himself? I lingered on alone in my never-to-be-told-of anguish—yielding to my breaking heart—yielding to this disease which attacked and is now killing me. I left the house I was in near Geneva, ever restless, ever anxious, and willing to find a more obscure place to die in. I did not

mean to stay in this little inn, but my pain and weakness increased greatly after I came to it, and all exertion seemed to have left me."

"Your disease would have been successfully grappled with if taken in time."

"That is very probable. But what have I left to live for?"

"Life might not always have been the blank for you that it is now. Lord Winchester—"

"It could have been nothing else—nothing but one continuous scene of bitter feeling," she interrupted. "He was in haste to fly to another idol."

Pulling open the drawer of the table, she took from it a torn piece of newspaper. "They told you that two days before you came I was taken worse?" she resumed.

"The landlady said so—alarmingly worse."

"It was excitement that did it. Ah! such excitement. In the evening of that day I was sitting here, all alone, when Lucie brought me some baked apples. They were very hot, just taken out of the oven, and her mother had doubled a piece of newspaper and placed it between the saucer and the waiter. In lingering over one of them, trying to eat it, my eyes fell upon the paper, and I saw that it was English. It was a copy of *Galignani's*, and of recent date. Lucie said a traveller had left it when he quitted the inn that morning. It was as well to look at that as to sit brooding over my gloomy thoughts, and I took it from under the saucer."

She put the paper into John Rayner's hand, pointing slightly to one part of it. He read the paragraph, which was written in that inflated style peculiar to newspapers:

"It is said that preliminaries for a marriage are being arranged between Viscount Winchester and the lovely and accomplished Lady Frances Gaiton, only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Gaiton. Both families are sojourning in the French capital."

John Rayner folded up the scrap of paper and returned it to her, making no comment. What could he make?

"Her name is Frances, too!" she murmured, as if communing with herself.

"But, three parts of their newspaper stories are utter inventions," he exclaimed. "This may be so."

"And is, so far as the announcement of the marriage goes. He would not dare that while I live. But he no doubt loves her."

III.

THE days passed on—but a few days—when one morning John Rayner was awoke by a bustle and commotion in the house. He opened his

room door, and saw Lucie passing in tears—Frances Hildyard was drawing near to death; or Frances Winchester, whichever it might be.

With what haste he could he entered her chamber; but nothing more could be done for her in this world. The landlady drew him away almost immediately. She had sent for a priest to shrive the penitent, and he was even then coming up.

"Monsieur le Curé is a good man," said the landlady. "He dined with us last Easter Sunday."

A ray of the afternoon sun fell on the bed when John Rayner entered the room for the last time. She opened her eyes as he bent over her.

"A few moments alone with you," she whispered. And John sent the landlady away, and closed the door.

"You have been very good to me, Mr. Rayner."

"What can I do for you?" he inquired.

"Nothing more for me. But upon your return to England, call upon my father and mother, and if, *as I now believe*, they never received those letters, tell them about me. But say nothing against *him*," she continued, convulsively pressing John's hands; "nothing, nothing against him. Let them not think I have been unhappy—or—deserted. It is the disease that has killed me: they said I should be liable to it."

The faint flush of excitement lighted up her cheek, and her hands shook with emotion as they lay in his. He saw how it was, and passed his word: there was no help for it.

"The promises to the dying are held sacred," she whispered.

"And Lord Winchester—shall I say aught if I ever meet him?"

"Not a word—not a syllable," she answered almost fiercely. "He does not cast a thought towards me in life, therefore it is scarcely probable a regret would follow me in death."

"Have you no further message for your mother?"

She turned her face to the wall, and for some moments he saw it not. "Tell them I have repented of all, and that I trust Heaven has forgiven me my sins, as I hope they will forgive. Tell them, that if life had been granted me, *and I could have redeemed the past*, I would that I had been as readily welcomed to their hearts again as I was when a little child. And tell them that God has taken me in mercy, for my clouded life would have been spent in yearnings and regrets."

She was buried near Lausanne. And John Rayner, upon the conclusion of the business that took him to Switzerland, left for England.

The clocks were striking twelve, and the day was sunny, when Mr. Rayner knocked at the door of Mrs. Hildyard.

Two plain women, dressed in deep mourning, were in the drawing-room. He had no difficulty in recognizing them to be the elder sisters of Frances. They heard what he had to say with indifference—at least it appeared so to him, though it may have been but their coldness

of manner. They inquired whether Lord Winchester was with her to the last,—which proved that they knew, at least, somewhat of the past,—and a little put out Mr. Rayner. He was not to have spoken of Lord Winchester.

“Pray spare me, madam,” was his answer. “I will tell you all I know of your sister, but upon Lord Winchester and his conduct I cannot enter.”

“Do you wish to spare him?”

“Madam, I should like to see him horsewhipped.”

“Frances need not have cautioned you,” were Miss Hildyard’s next words, delivered with all sadness of a subdued spirit; “for that is what I suppose she did. Our father is no longer here to feel indignation or resent insult; our mother is broken-hearted, and fast hastening to her grave; and we are two lone women, whose path in life has been fearfully clouded by her who is no more, and whose vengeance, even had we power and will to wreak it, would fall harmless upon the head of one so high in the world’s favour as is Lord Winchester.”

“Frances prayed for him in dying,” answered John Rayner.

“May our minds, when this new pang shall have passed, be brought into the like Christian state!” they answered, bowing stiffly. And what with the exceeding stiffness of all around him, and the disagreeable nature of the task he had undertaken, John was right glad when the interview was over. As to questioning the two reserved and self-contained ladies on the subject of the letters written at the convent, John found he might as well have held his tongue. They only shook their heads and knew “nothing.”

Two days afterwards he read her death in the *Times*. “Frances Theresa, youngest daughter of the late Richard Hildyard, Esquire.”

It was on a lovely day in spring that John Rayner chanced to be near one of the fashionable west-end churches. A bridal party was coming out of it, all glitter and noise and white satin favours. A crowd had gathered to gaze at the finery, and he stood afar off to gaze also.

In the foremost carriage sat the young man with the well-remembered face that he had once seen by the source of the Arveyron at Chamouni—Lord Winchester. Singularly attractive John had thought him then; singularly so did he think him now. By his side sat a beautiful girl, until that morning Lady Frances Gaiton, now his bride: but not so beautiful as that other girl, lying in her lonely grave, away from home and kindred.

“I don’t wish *you* ill, Lady Winchester,” thought John as the carriage passed him, “but it is another who ought to have sat there. And *he* best knows how much and how little wrong he did her. I hope his conscience pricks him!”

